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59

PATTERNS



59th edition of Patterns

Patterns magazine is St. Clair County Community College's literary and arts publication. Published annually since 1959, *Patterns* showcases the best writing and visual artwork produced by SC4 students each year. While organization and oversight of the publication has always been handled by SC4 faculty and staff, over the years we have increasingly involved students in every aspect of the publication; from producing its content, to editing, to the creative layout and design work, our students have taken on a major role in creating each issue of the magazine.

This edition marks our continued focus on improving the physical and aesthetic qualities of the magazine. Perhaps as a result of these improvements, last year's edition won Second Place in its division for the Community College Humanities Association's Literary Magazine Competition for the second year in a row. This year, three very talented SC4 students presented proposals for the layout and design. We were pleased to select Emma Bostick's concept with illustrations and photography supported by Rachel Henion and Jared Nichols.



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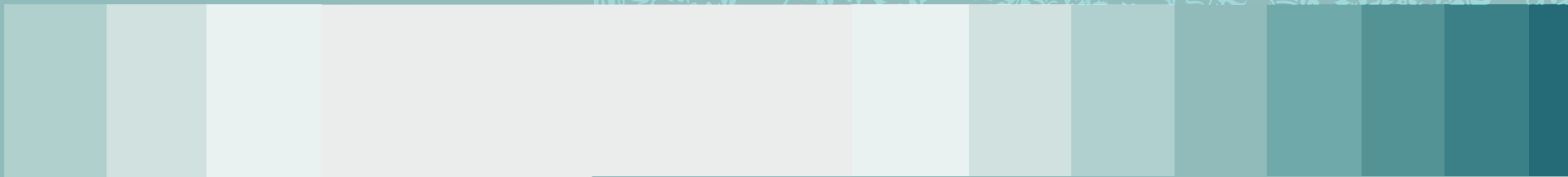


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- *Patterns* magazine

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special awards for writing and art

Readers of *Patterns* will note that each year five special awards are given, named for past faculty members who had made extraordinary contributions to the arts and literature on campus and to *Patterns* in particular. The Blanche Redman, Richard Colwell and Kathy Nickerson Awards are given for the highest quality submissions for that year in poetry, fiction and essay writing, respectively. The Patrick Bourke and Eleanor Mathews Awards recognize students who have done exceptional work in a more general sense.

eleanor mathews award **THERESE MAJESKI**

For over thirty years, the English faculty of SC4 has awarded the Eleanor Mathews Award for “outstanding creativity, technical skill, and individual style” to recognize student writers for overall achievement in creative writing. (By contrast, the Redman, Colwell and Nickerson Awards recognize the highest quality writing in each specific genre.) Traditionally the Mathews Award has been given to a deserving student who has had work published in *Patterns* in multiple genres and/or over a number of years. This year we enjoy an embarrassment of riches because, for the first time in recent memory, we have three students with works accepted in all three genres –Therese Majeski, Tempeste Mayvs, and Maria Vallee all have had poems, stories and essays selected for publication in *Patterns*. This year’s Mathews winner is Therese Majeski, in recognition of having had her work selected for publication in the 57th and 58th editions of *Patterns*, as well as for her outstanding works published this year.

patrick bourke award **RACHEL HENION**

The Patrick Bourke Award honors an art or design student who has made a commitment to pursue an advanced degree in one of the visual arts disciplines and has been an advocate and emissary for art at St. Clair County Community College.

This year’s recipient is Rachel Henion who is currently completing her associate’s degree in graphic design. Rachel is being honored for her dedication to the arts and for the exceptional quality and caliber of the work that she produces.

Essays





Locked Lips

Therese Majeski

I, Therese Majeski, being of reasonably sound mind, not wholly unattractive body, and fairly pleasant personality, have never kissed, or been kissed by, anyone. My introverted disposition, the fact that I have yet to meet anyone of a masculine persuasion even remotely worth kissing, and a general boredom with the idea of romance have propelled sweet sixteen towards a more non-interested nineteen. Given this lack of interest in the romantic, it seems ridiculously ironic that my lowest priority would, for a brief time, become my most pressing.

When I first heard the noises, I didn't suspect that they meant a threat to my apathy towards kissing and I didn't expect anything to be wrong, or at least no more than usual. Unpleasant, loud, and otherwise arresting sounds were fairly common in our apartment building, though, as yet, none of the noises generated had been those of an actual arrest. Instead, residents of our building grow accustomed to the sound of slamming doors, the occasional police visit, and domestic disputes; in a twelve unit building, shouted family battles make for excellent background music. So, when I first heard shrieks from outside my apartment, I assumed they were just part of a standard performance. *Where the Hell Did You Hide My Cigarettes, You Jerk: An Audio Play in Three Acts* was frequently performed for the benefit of the entire building.

After a moment, however, I realized that these cries were different, holding a rough overlay of panic usually not present during a fight over who gets to use the car. I decided to investigate. I put a marker in the textbook I had been reading, took a firm grip on my cane, and shuffled out into the hallway. The screams were louder now, sounding anguished and desperate. The door of the apartment across the hall was partly open. Inside, Mr. and Mrs. Walsh, the ten-

ants of the apartment, and a woman I didn't recognize were gathered around a couch at the back of the room. The woman was shaking a man who lay motionless on the couch, screaming for him to wake up. I had no idea who the man was, as I didn't often talk with other people in the building. (Thanks a lot, introverted personality.)

"Is everything ok?" I asked with startling insight, "Do you need me to call 911?"

"Yes. We called 911. They're coming," Mr. Walsh said, sounding disoriented. A slight, stooped man in plaid pajama pants, he had a haggard, bearded face and eyes that looked like those of fawn that has just seen its mother run over.

"Can I help?" I started towards the couch, feeling unsteady with my cane but no shoes.

"He won't wake up! Rob won't wake up! Why won't he wake up?" The woman, face wrung with desperation, clung to the unmoving man.

"What's wrong with him? Is he breathing?" My uncanny command of the situation told me these might be good questions to ask.

"I don't *know*. We just woke up and he was like this. He was fine when he went to bed. Rob, come back!" She knelt by the couch and started a hysterical effort at CPR, crying and pressing her wet, reddened face against his. She was hyperventilating, which was probably not useful when trying to resuscitate someone.

"Ma'am? Ma'am, you have to move." I wasn't sure what I could do, but she clearly wasn't having much effect.

She moved, and I had my first clear view of the man on the couch. He wore dark jeans and a gray buttoned shirt. His shaved head only served to emphasize the tint of his skin, a faint blue that darkened and brought out the pores on his face.

My mind, which until this point had been operating more or less on autopilot, finally called me back to the cockpit. I'd never been able to detect a pulse properly, so I placed my fingers beneath the man's nose to see if he was breathing. I thought I could detect air moving.

"I think he's breathing."

Mr. Walsh pressed his hand to the man's chest. "He has a good strong heartbeat. Good and strong."

"That's good. A heartbeat's always good." I dazedly followed Mr. Walsh's example, placing my hand where I imagined the heart might be, but could feel nothing other than my own slamming pulse.

I tried to think of what to do. Truncated, jumbled pieces of ideas wandered aimlessly through my mind. How were you supposed to deal with unresponsive people until help arrived? Should we prop his head? His feet? Did his neck need to be braced? Should we move him at all? Did he need, what was it called? An enema?

I stood there by the couch with a brain that stubbornly refused to give me anything even remotely helpful. Around me, the Walshes and the woman I assumed was the man's girlfriend continued to panic. She had started frenzied chest compressions, kneeling on the man's legs and throwing her petite body into the effort, pounding her fists on his chest like it was a drum. Mr. Walsh fiddled with a pillow beneath the man's head while Mrs. Walsh hovered in the background, wondering distraughtly why the EMTs hadn't arrived yet. I was reasonably calm, at least comparatively speaking, but had to fight back the vague idea that if I couldn't remember what to do, then the poor guy's death could very well be my fault. I may have been a bit in shock.

Finally, an idea solidified. I remembered that in order to perform CPR you were supposed to tilt the victim's head back and clear the airway. With this in mind, I reached down and tried to press the man's head back. His shaved scalp felt rough and slightly warm.

"I can't move his neck. Is that normal?" I couldn't get his head to budge at all and vaguely wondered if it was because he might have a medical condition causing spinal fusion. Nobody answered. The girlfriend ripped the pillow from under the man's head, sobbing. Mrs. Walsh paced.

"I'm going to try CPR," I said to Mr. Walsh, "Can you tilt his head back? I'm not strong enough."

I knelt, not noticing where I laid my cane. Now closer to the man, I became aware of an absurd level of detail. His jeans slouched, revealing the top of dark blue boxers, and he wore a cluster of religious medals on a chain around his neck. His eyelids were slightly open, exposing blank whites. Thick, chunky spittle crusted in a line across his lips and cheek.

I pressed one hand against his chin and the other against the upper half of his face, trying to open his mouth. His lips separated, pulling strands of saliva and revealing purplish gums, but his jaw remained locked, his teeth clenched and overlapping. Bewildered, I sat back. It occurred to me that the stiffness in his jaw and his neck might be connected.

"I can't get his mouth open," I said to Mr. Walsh, whose only response was to continue pressing against the man's head, trying to tilt it back.

The man's arm dangled over the side of the couch. This bothered me and I numbly lifted it to drape limply over his chest. To my mind at the moment, this seemed immensely helpful.

Except the man continued to just lie there. All right, so it hadn't been quite as helpful as I'd thought. What to do next? Well, there was still CPR. Maybe if I blew hard enough I would be able to force air through those clenched teeth. With a very "what the hell, it couldn't hurt" attitude, I again separated his lips.

I started to lean in, but paused, realizing on a not entirely

conscious level that I really didn't want to kiss this guy, even if it was just for first aid reasons. Then logic and my reasonably fervent desire for him not to die kicked in.

I was about to have my first approximation of a kiss, my lips hovering inches above the man's congealing saliva and bruised gums, when the apartment door buzzer sounded and footsteps pounded up the stairs. The EMTs had finally arrived. It's entirely possible that I was vastly relieved.

In retrospect, it should have been obvious to me that the man was not only dead, but had been so for some hours. After all, I have read plenty of books involving corpses in varying stages of decomposition and I had a reasonable theoretical, if not practical, understanding of the symptoms of death, particularly rigor mortis. Really, the immobile neck and jaw should have been a dead giveaway. As it was, the fact that the man I'd been trying to save was long deceased didn't register until the girlfriend, less hysterical, but face still blotched and pinched with grief, sidestepped the EMTs and stripped off the man's socks. Fingers trembling visibly, she clutched them as if they were precious and might be snatched away.

Mr. Walsh gently wiped the flecks of spittle from the man's cheek.

The EMTs made no move to stop either of them and clearly saw no reason for urgency. Mr. Walsh's efforts and the girlfriend's desire for a keepsake, for all their tenderness, suddenly defined futility.

I later learned that the man, Rob, had died at some point in the night, of a heart attack, long before I even knew he existed. In an odd sort of way this was a relief; if he had been dead before I even arrived, it couldn't have been my ineptitude at CPR that killed him.

Anyway, I've heard dead bodies are supposed to be terrible kissers.



The Unconscious Escape

Maria Vallee



The characters in "The Wall-Reader," written by Fiona Barr, live in a war zone: an environment that is emotionally tense, and physically run-down. Mary's enjoyment from reading political art in 1952 Northern Ireland shows how the intelligent woman deals with the situation at hand. She leaves her home to analyze the way the words are written, rather than their intended meaning, and she wants to be on the wall herself. As the story progresses, her character comes to realize the danger behind the words she once loved. "The Wall Reader" shows readers that we can act out, even if we are unaware of doing so.

Mary is a housewife and a new mother who had to talk herself into believing that the routine she and her husband, Seán, follow is good. However, her "pangs of jealousy" from another's exciting accomplishments in life tell the reader otherwise. Mary takes joy in going for a walk with her child to read walls; we see the depth of her mind as she studies the writings. "Oh how she longed to linger under the bridge taking each wall in turn, studying the meanest scrawl, pondering sensitivity, evaluating character, identifying subconscious fears, analyzing childhoods." While Mary's neighbors might see graffiti, sloppily splattered on the city's walls, contributing to the ugliness of the war, she sees a person who had the freedom to express themselves—something she lacks. "If someone only noticed her from time to time" could be a description of her husband's lack of attention to her needs. As readers, we can feel her desire to be understood. There is no evidence in the text to show that he listens to her, or appreciates her work at home caring for their child. We only know he refers to her walks as 'fantasy time.' It is no wonder she enjoys talking to an English soldier in a deserted park. "Visions of Germany... holiday brochures come to life," their conversations allow her to travel outside of her home, and live out her adventurous, curious side. Beyond

that, Mary must feel good knowing there is a person who doesn't need to see her face, but simply hear her voice.

Mary and John's friendship grows over the months. John talks of his wife and child back home, and he can imagine the experiences he is missing, as Mary's child grows. If the soldier's intentions are to have a conversation that transports him away from the deserted park, then they are good for each other. However, Mary has nothing but trust to prove that the soldier doesn't have darker motives. When they have their "meeting of minds," Mary is risking a lot by talking to the enemy, regardless of how innocent she tells herself their conversations are. In the story, she describes what she's seen and heard, "...women who had been tarred and feathered...people who had been shot in the head, boys who had been knee-capped, all for suspected fraternizing with troops." Her need to be listened to, and to explore other lives beyond the walls of Belfast, left her vulnerable. Once again, while she claims there's "no harm" in a routine, she still searches for more, which puts her own life in danger, in addition to that of her husband and child's.

Mary's conversations are dangerous, but she doesn't seem to admit that to herself. She sees the Protestant soldier, John, as human. She trusts his words, and lives through his descriptions. When Mary sees the word 'Tout' written on her wall, she focuses more on the quality of the words written before the actual meaning hit her. "The letters were uneven, paint splattered down from the crossed T, the U looked a misshapen O... the impact perfect." She is finally aware of the danger she has brought to their lives, and all because someone listened. Mary must now have guilt, in addition to all her desires and dreams to be known going unfulfilled. Even unconsciously, Mary could have been crying for attention by acting out of the ordinary; the consequences of her actions bring her the threat of death. While the story ends with Mary and her family successfully escaping, Mary never does escape. They move to a new town, but she will still be a housewife, and a mother; there is no indication that their routine will be any different. Barr does a successful job of making the reader breathe a sigh of relief when the question of their survival has passed, but feel her panic, knowing she is still trapped.

"Ordinary Women: Themes in Contemporary Fiction by Irish Women" points out that Mary, like many women in the 70's and 80's, haven't fought for equal rights yet, but they are very aware of what is going on; Mary is "trapped" (Weekes 90). If she were to try to take more action, or control over her life, and she might fear losing the life she has, considering all the hatred and violence surrounding her,

even if she is unhappy with it deep down. The article makes it clear, though, that there are many women during this time who are unhappy, but Mary only understands that "respectable housewives don't read walls!" According to a section in "Representing the Troubles in Irish Short Fiction," Mary's actions only become real to her when she faces a threat (Storey). Like many of us in our daily lives, we don't think about our own actions until we face the repercussions. Until that happened to Mary, she was almost living a dream, where she could have a conversation with a stranger without risking her life, as well as her family's. However, Storey makes note that these actions were considered peculiar to everyone but her. Mary did try to fit in, and act how it was expected of her. On a walk, she attempted to avoid the "temptations" of reading walls, by taking her baby to the park, which led her to John, and helped her to finally have a word written about her: Tout. This one word delivered its message and changed her life.

The end of the story shows that Mary finally saw the people behind the words, and "their meanness saddened her." Her act of rebellion to break out of her everyday routine, by talking to a nice soldier, left her feeling like less of a failure. She had faith that he would carry her stories to the people he would meet; he would speak her name back home, and "maybe even admire her simple-minded ignorance of Belfast's sordid heart." Even if her daily routine didn't change after they had settled into their new home, she would at least be remembered in that way. It does make the reader wonder if Mary will act how a wife and mother should during that time, or if she will continue to find new ways to escape.

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Torn in Two

Carly Verbeke

It had been the same routine for the past month and a half - I'd come home from school and check the mailbox for a letter. Sometimes I beat the post man and I'd wait for him by the road. Some days he drove by without leaving me anything other than bills and propaganda, other days he'd stop and hand me a stack of pages wearing a letter as the crown. As much as I wanted to see my name scrawled across the front of it, I knew not to get my hopes up. Usually Kyle just included a comment or two for me in the margins of the letter he'd written mom. Apparently he was bored one Sunday, though, because there were three envelopes hidden between the Target ads and bills that day. I flipped through the letters - One for Tammy, the next for Tyler, and the last one... Carly.

'He actually wrote one for me.' A mixture of fear and excitement flooded my mind. He had something that was meant for only me to know, something that probably would have worried my mom if she'd found it scrawled in her

margins. Holding this envelope made me understand that something was off for him, and knowing that my name was the only one written on the front meant that he needed to enforce the trust we'd always had for one another; it just came with the twin territory. It was like his last night home all over again.

He waited until mom went to bed before coming into my room, flopping on the bed with me and saying he didn't want to go through with it. I looked at him from the corner of my eye and bit my lip, a nervous habit. "A little late for that now, isn't it?" I tried to make it sound light and sarcastic, but I think it came out a bit demanding.

"Carly I'm freaked out." he said, "I don't do well with orders, I smile all the time, I'm massive, so I'm not that great at moving quickly and I'm only good at protecting you."

The last one broke my heart. All of it was true, he had never been good at following instructions and his smile always got

him in some kind of trouble. My mom always tells people how the school board wanted to hold him back a year in kindergarten because all he ever wanted to do was play, never listening to our teacher. And that smile, it was ever - present on his face. Even in the most serious situations his smile would be there to lighten the mood. His sergeants were going to have a field day with him. I wasn't too worried, but hearing that he felt he was only good at protecting me tore my heart in a way I didn't really know how to deal with.

I always tried really hard to rely solely on my own strength to get me through whatever life threw my way, but I always knew that Kyle could feel it too. Whenever it became too much I knew I could rely on him to help me, and he would always protect me even when the only danger was inside my own head. And now, in just a few hours, I was going to lose that.

"I know, but I think it's a good fit for you," I said, searching my ceiling for the right thing to say. "I mean, I'm not personally a fan of giving up my best friend and body guard either, but maybe the rest of the country could benefit from that too. I just don't want them to change you

too much, that's what scares me about it" my voice cracked, "but what would you be doing if you weren't leaving in the morning?"

"Work at Menards and play with Zeus all day." It was a typical Kyle answer. I don't know why I expected anything different.

"You *would* aspire to work at a hardware store and play with our dog for the rest of your life," I laughed. "But Kyle, you're capable of so much more than you give yourself credit for. It'll be good for you, give you some direction. And you'll be good for it, too. You're like the stereotypical Marine: big, strong, and stupid. You'll be okay, I promise. But you should probably go to bed."

"Can I stay in here?"

"If you want."

He would kill me if he knew I told people that my big, bad, Marine brother had spent his last night before boot camp having a sleepover in my room. It's a memory that I'll cherish forever though, proof that not all innocence is lost when we grow up. That's just how it went for us, he protected me and I took care of him. Maybe it's just a special trait that came along with being a twin, but we always knew when something was wrong with the other. We've exchanged plenty

of text conversations that went something like:

'Hey are you okay?'

'No. People suck and I need to smile.'

'Which people? I'll make them regret it. We can go for a drive later. I'll make ya' smile girl.'

Receiving this letter was like receiving those texts. I tore into the envelope without even bothering to move out of the road first. It only contained four words, but it was enough:

I miss my twin.

It wasn't anything either of us had to experience before our relationship was reduced to words on paper. Missing him was never an option, even if I wanted it to be. When we were younger I always longed for things that were just mine: friends that were only mine, somewhere where I could walk into the bathroom and not have him already standing there - in the middle of brushing his teeth - telling me that he had left his toothbrush at a friend's house so he figured it was okay to use mine. When we graduated high school, I couldn't wait to go away to university and put some distance between us. Then, I finally got that space and by the second day I was texting him the quickest route with the

least amount of traffic to come get me for the weekend.

I went away for school and he came to get me every weekend just so we could veg out on the couch together. When this whole "joining the military" thing became real though, I realized that he couldn't come home whenever he wanted just because that's where I was. I made him hug me last, before we dropped him off to go to training in South Carolina for the next three months. I wanted to be last so the feeling of his protective arms around me would stay there until I could see him again. I had eighty-three days and counting to figure out exactly how the hell I was supposed to be "Carly" without "Kyle." In my mind, it was impossible. There was no Carly without Kyle; we were two halves of the same whole.

The pain I felt the morning after we dropped him off was unlike anything I've ever experienced before, an indescribable amount of pain heavy on my heart. Nothing was right and I was empty. The emptiness became numbness, instead of being one with my own spirit I felt like I was watching someone else live my life for me. It was crippling, physically and mentally. I followed myself out of my room,

expecting him to jump out from behind the wall that separates the living room and kitchen from the rest of the house. In my mind, he was supposed to jump out and scare the crap out of me, and then say something like, "Haha-ha! It was just a joke! And you totally fell for it! You should see yourself, you're pathetic, crying like that."

But he didn't jump out from behind the wall. It wasn't a cruel joke, it was the new reality. Kyle had gone away to become a Marine and serve his country, and I was left here to figure out who I wanted to be now that we weren't a package deal. *Who did I want to be?* In that moment I knew I wanted to be on the school's campus so I could hug my best friend and have him tell me I wasn't pathetic, that I had just been torn in two. I did eventually get there, and that exact conversation took place although I know I still looked pathetic no matter what he said because I was hanging onto him like he was the only thing that could save me now.

After that though I slowly began to figure out that I didn't need saving. As the days went on and Kyle's absence became less raw, I discovered that I *could* be my own person, without check-

ing to see if it was okay with him first. I started researching the requirements for joining the United States Peace Corps, something I had wanted to do since I was eight years old but never pursued because everyone I knew told me it was unrealistic. It was common sense that people in wheelchairs didn't just hop on planes and change the world by helping underdeveloped countries become more equipped. America wasn't even set up for people like me to be successful. How did I expect to be successful in the slums of Africa? Still, I became excited when I saw that the only requirement the Peace Corps really had was that their volunteers needed a bachelor's degree. I knew not to get my hopes up too quickly through, the wheelchair *was* a huge setback. Then an e-mail pinged in my inbox.

The subject said "Michael Gall with the United States Peace Corps" and that's all I could read before anxiety flooded my body. This one man's opinion could determine the path that the rest of my life would take. There was no way I was opening that email alone. A moment like this was when I needed Kyle the most, he'd open the e-mail for me and if the answer was "No" it'd be easier to hear from him. But

Kyle wasn't here, and the answer wasn't "No."

"You can do it."

I took my shaking hands away from my face and stared at my best friend. "What?"

"The recruiter thinks you can do it," he repeated. "Do you want me to read it to you?" I only nodded. He cleared his throat.

"Carly, thank you for your interest in the United States Peace Corps. To my knowledge, we have not had a volunteer who used a wheelchair or a walker before, but the placement officers have worked with plenty of people who have different needs to make sure that their service is productive and safe for them. It will be easier to know if you will be able to serve in the Peace Corps once you go through the required medical examination but since you have a couple of years before you can apply I see no reason why you shouldn't continue on this path and strengthening your application. I look forward to working with you. Michael."

My anxiety turned to excitement again. *They think I can do this.* Suddenly I felt like I was on top of the world. I could do anything I wanted to. It didn't matter what my family thought, what my

friends thought, and for once I didn't need Kyle's approval either. He wasn't here for me to live vicariously through anymore. He was on his own path, learning to do what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. And now, so was I.

I started doing research again immediately. I was going to be prepared, the strongest applicant the Peace Corps would see in decades. My wheelchair would be the only reason they would have not to accept me. So, I picked my top three areas of service and began to focus on what would benefit me the most. If I were going to be teaching English it only made sense to switch my major from a degree in Liberal Arts to a degree specifically in English. I even took a few "Intro to Education" classes because, well, it would help if I knew how to teach. I stayed in contact with the recruiters and began doing the things they suggested that will make my application one of the more competitive ones when I submitted it; which included applying for a semester abroad in Thailand to teach English for a few weeks and earn a Teaching English (as a) Foreign Language certificate.

Not even that idea frightened me anymore. Finally I was free to be who I was, to travel

and help improve the lives of people who were less fortunate than myself. Sure, the program could deny me but nothing could stop me from chasing my dreams anymore. I was untouchable. I was determined. And now I knew that as much as Kyle being missing from me felt like the worst thing in the world, it was a time for me to be my own person. We had never been our own people before, and that's the thing that people who don't have twins don't understand. You aren't your own person. You make up the same person. In our person, Kyle had the wild side, and I was the grounded one. We balanced each other out in a way that made us both functional members of society. It just happened so that when our person was cut in half, he was off learning how to be tame and I was learning what it felt like to be wild.

I was spontaneous in everything I did. I skipped classes that I didn't particularly like and went to the boardwalk or met friends for coffee at our favorite café downtown. I stayed out until sunrise listening to the trains passing. I finally knew who Carly was, and I liked her. But when I got the letter that day, I remembered that I still had another part to me. Suddenly I was done being so carefree. I wanted someone

to force me to be the responsible one again. I wanted Kyle to come home so I could take care of him. Something was wrong on his end, and I wasn't there to fix it. I read the letter over and over again, still sitting in the road because the words made it too painful to move.

I miss my twin.

I miss mine, too.



Short Stories





Corner Options

Therese Majeski

Too many doors. My knee is bruising as it slams again and again on the underside of the table. Way too many heavy, locked doors and no more options. My pulse is a constant hum drilling into my head. I try not to look at the one-way mirror in front of me. The burning in my mind hasn't stopped. It should have, but now it's way worse, like it's had time to sink into my body. I can't shake the idea – it's shredding me – that everything is *broken*. The world is made of broken, sharp edges that cut into every part of me. It can't *really* be my fault that the antique dealer died, but that doesn't kill the nightmare.

I just barely resist the frantic need to slam my head into the table.

The door across the room opens and I jump, rising partway from my seat before the handcuffs jerk me to a stop in a half-crouch.

A man comes in and closes the door behind him. He hands me a paper cup half filled with coffee and sits down. The chair creaks.

The man consults a near-empty file. "Mateo Estrada?"

I consider lying, just to mess with him, but there's no point.

"Yeah."

The man extends a hand. "Peter Ritter. I'll be your legal counsel."

I don't shake.

The lawyer rolls his eyes and withdraws the hand. "Gangsta. Fine, *bro*. Why did you decide to rob – "he checks the file, "- Brian Zielinski's antique shop?"

I try to focus on the coffee cup, but the whiteness of its paper – the color – it's way too familiar. I switch to staring at the scuffs on the table to avoid looking at the one-way glass. I try not to think about the robbery. Doesn't work...

... I jimmy the shop window. I have to think about important things, wearing gloves, putting my mask on, only grabbing cash and jewelry, but

my brain feels like a balloon straining with too much helium. The window gives an angry shriek and I jump back, nearly dropping my crowbar. I suck in a deep breath. All I want is for this to be over, but my stomach hurts when I think of life on the other side of tonight. I wait for a minute to make sure an alarm won't go off. I kiss my scapular, trying to reassure myself. It's ok. He doesn't have an alarm. The shop stays quiet. I swing a leg over the sill and pull myself through the window before I have time to think any more. Inside, the shop is surprisingly bright with moonlight. I feel exposed. I move to the cash register, weaving through old chairs, wardrobes, and bedsteads. I pry the register open quickly and jam the contents in my pockets without bothering to count. The wads of cash feel slender and wispy in my hand. I see my fingers are shaking. I don't need to be scared. For the hundredth time, I picture the owner of this shop giving that fifty to the panhandler who everyone in the neighborhood knows isn't actually blind or a veteran. Zielinski gave Sergeant Heely that money, even though he had to know Sarge was faking. He is a very kind, generous man. That type of man wouldn't mind too much if I take a little money and jewelry. I feel my hands steady just a little at the next thought. And even if he

did catch me, a man like that might not even press charges. As soon as I can trust my hands, I move to the jewelry counter. There is an expensive lock on the glass cabinet. I ignore it and break the top of the counter with the crowbar. The glass shatters with a muted groan and clatter. I reach in to grab a handful of the dimly shining silver and gold bracelets. "What are you doing?" I swing around, spraying scraps of glass as my sleeve drags across the broken remains of the countertop. A man stands there, blond hair searing white in the moonlight. A light comes on and I can see the surprise in Mr. Zielinski's face. "You're the guitar player from the street – Mateo?" I feel fear shoot painfully from the base of my skull to the pit of my stomach. How does Zielinski recognize – I put a hand up to my face and find it moist and naked. I've forgotten the mask. I look at Brian Zielinski helplessly – I think part of me wants to be told what to do next. Finally, I remember I have a voice. "Don't call the police!" My voice is pitched high enough to hurt as it comes out. Zielinski looks surprised and I feel a soothing flare of relief. "Why would I..." Zielinski's eyes go to the crowbar on top of the jewelry case, the glass that covers the floor, the bracelets I have dropped. His expression sharpens into anger. "You

damn little shit. Are you robbing me!" My heart goes into overtime, forcing confusion through my body. No, no, no. My view of Zielinski's anger is blocked by drifting clots of blackness. I lean on the broken counter, closing my eyes, trying to understand, trying to pull in air. Why's he this angry? It doesn't make sense. When I look up again, Zielinski is holding a phone "... hurry up. I'll hold him until you get here." My body flashes cold then hot. "You called the police?" I ask, though I already know. I start to back away from Zielinski. The window is the only thing I can think about now, the only way to fix this nightmare. But Zielinski guesses what I'm thinking and moves between me and the path to the window. There is no way I'll get past him because Zielinski is crazy big. I realize I'm begging, hardly knowing what I'm saying, just needing to put something between myself and what I see coming. "Please," I get out, "let me go. I swear I won't bother you again. At least don't press charges!" Zielinski looks even angrier. "You tried to rob me. Why wouldn't I press charges, you freaking little bastard?" He keeps coming until I'm backed up against a shelf. Zielinski is inches from my face. I can smell the bitter sourness of his breath. I start feeling around on the shelf at my back, behind, above.

I just need a way out. Zielinski won't let up. "You think you can destroy my property and just get away with it? No way." I'm flooded in panic, a surging, hot flow that makes this horrible, burning buzzing in my head. My hand, searching the shelf above me, meets something large and very heavy. The police will be here soon. I can stay and be arrested or... I think for a moment, then decide not to think at all – it's too hard. The pounding of my chest, the hot buzzing in my mind, are too strong. I tell myself I can't help it. This is wrong – My hand grabs the heavy thing – a lamp – and I swing it as hard as possible into Zielinski's head. The lamp cracks and so does Zielinski's head. He falls and I stare at the body, its skull dented and spongy-looking. Dark blood is covering the white-blond hair...

... The lawyer is saying something. "So the lamp was on the shelf over you?"

I nod, afraid that if I try to talk anymore the frenzy inside me will break out again. The world around me feels changed, feels toxic, and just existing in it burns me.

"Theoretically," the lawyer says "you could have, I dunno, fallen against the shelf in the struggle, made a grab at the lamp for balance,



accidentally pulled it down on the guy's head." The man rubs his pudgy hands together, his focus no longer on me.

"Hmm. It might almost make manslaughter. Won't get you off of course, but might swing you a plea bargain."

I stare at him, but my eyes aren't focusing. I'm gouging the backs of my own hands with my nails. It doesn't feel like I'm doing it to myself.

The lawyer is still talking. "Anyway, you were scared, probably felt threatened, you were afraid he was going to hurt you. Yeah! A jury might buy that. No way you knew what you were doing."

I finally look up to face this smug asshole, but my eyes land just over the man's right shoulder and on the mirror. I notice my scapular is hanging outside my shirt. Suddenly I'm very aware of its presence around my neck. Its weight reminds me of things – I stop thinking and I tuck it back into my shirt. All at once, I need to see what I look like after everything that happened last night. Slowly, I let my eyes focus on the reflection of my face.

I look like shit.

The walls of the holding cell they put me in are blank. No graffiti, no stains even. Nothing to look at or think

about. The burning pressure in my mind still won't stop – it's actually getting worse. I'm still fighting not to think. Every time the same thought cycles around it gets closer to breaking through.

I can't think about last night. It all seemed worth it at the time... No. Not going there. I cross the room. I sit down. I stand up. I rattle the door, rub my face – it's all a blur. I just need to keep moving. Panic shoves me across the room again. I run my hand along the wall, it's an old tile, sort of antique – Shit! I collapse on the bench. My knees are hammering the air. Why did I – This time I do slam my head into the wall, smashing it back several times. It helps. The dizziness, the pain, it makes it harder to think. I become aware of a wetness at the back of my head and pull my fingers through my hair.

They come away bright red and sticky.

And the thoughts are out.

I don't want it to be my fault, it can't be my fault. Sensations and images from last night are eating my mind and now I can't help figuring out how they fit with me. I replay everything that happened.

Zielinski – he was threatening me, right? It was self-defense. I want to believe this. I need to believe this. I was *scared*.

I feel the fear all over again. That hot, kicking, screaming panic, that fear he would get me *arrested*...

Shit. Shit, shit, shit. My heart is beating so hard it hurts. Was that why I swung that lamp?

I'm scrubbing the heels of my hands into my eyes and trying to think now. The panic it *hurt*, made things blurry, but did I actually think Zielinski was going to hurt me?

He had me backed against the shelf, telling me I was going to jail... I couldn't go to jail, had to get away, the panic was burning, I was scared of what would happen if I swung that lamp, but the fear hurt so much I decided I didn't care –

I feel like my stomach's been beaten with a baseball bat and for a second I could swear my heart stops. I *decided* I didn't care.

It is my fault.

For a second, I think the guilt will kill me. My mouth has gone dry. I feel so lightheaded that I'm sure I'll hit the ceiling any second. I'm having

trouble breathing – I tug at the neck of my shirt and my fingers snag on my scapular.

As my hand closes around it, I don't really feel better, but somehow, I don't think that it matters. Clutching my scapular I feel more solid, like it's a leash holding back the worst of the panic. I sit there, doing my best to breathe, for a long time. The guilt isn't gone and the world still feels broken into jagged pieces that are slicing me, but I think I can see how the pieces might fit, how it might get smoother.

Hands shaking, I kiss my scapular and wonder if they have confession in prison.



Lunch Date

Tricia Timlin



"Dylan!"

A shout awoke Dylan from his trance. He looked over at the source of this angry voice sitting across from him. Her sharp eyes pierced through him and her expensive nails clicked impatiently against the table. He remembered when those same gray eyes were once filled with the purest of love. Now they only seemed to glare at him or her phone.

"You're not listening." She spoke through cleaned teeth and crossed her arms.

"Violet, I am listening!" he smiled, taking a sip of his cold coffee, holding back a gag. He watched as his girlfriend sighed and got her phone out of her pocket. His eyes started to linger around the coffee house. He used to love coming to this place with Violet. They would look around at the odd people in the room and wonder what their stories were.

Dylan's eyes stopped on a lone girl who was sitting peacefully at a table not too far from them. Her jet-black hair was pulled back and hidden under a blue beanie. She had a book open on the table and green eyes ate alive that book. The waiter came by with a new cup of coffee and went to the man behind her. This bald-headed man seemed to be having a problem with his food. He had picked at it and shoved the plate at the waiter shaking his head. As the waiter ran off, the man turned and looked at Dylan who instantly looked away.

"Are you seriously checking out the waitress? I'm right here." Violet snapped at him, and set her phone down on the coffee stained table. She pulled back her blonde hair and wrapped her hands around her coffee cup.

"First of all," Dylan leaned back in his chair and folded his arms, "That's a dude." He pointed at the waiter who brought back a plate of new food for the angry bald man.

"Whatever." Violet picked up her phone and slumped in her chair, pretending not to care. Her face was slightly red but her eyes were fierce.

Dylan rolled his eyes and saw the waiter bringing over a coffee that Dylan had ordered twenty minutes ago. The waiter set it on the table, spilling it a little and running off.

A loud clank made Dylan jump and he looked over to see the large bald man standing in a rage. The remains of a coffee cup were spread across the floor.

"S-sir!" the waiter mumbled as he ran over to him, only to be pushed away. His back bumped into the quietly reading girl, causing her to push her coffee over, spilling it over her book. She slowly picked up the book, coffee flooded off of it. Turning, her eyes filled with horror as she looked at the murderer of her beloved book.

"What is this?!" her voice was barely discernable, but you could hear her anger loud and clear.

"A...A b-ook..." the waiter stood up, balancing himself out.

A few other customers had turned to look at what was happening. Dylan looked as even Violet had managed to pry her eyes away from her phone to see.

"How could you do this?!" the girl's sad voice turned hard and she glared at the waiter.

"It's not my fault!" the waiter yelled at her and the coffeehouse turned silent. Turning and pointing to the bald man he shouted, "He's the asshole who has been hounding me about getting everyone's credit card numbers from this lousy dump! I don't even *fucking* like coffee!"

Thanking himself for always using cash, Dylan watched as the stressed-out waiter continued to have his meltdown and realized that the black-haired girl disappeared.

"Where'd that girl go?" Dylan mumbled and stood up, accidentally knocking back his chair. Violet heard him and gave him a glare only Medusa would ever appreciate.

"*That's* your biggest concern?! Can't you see that this is a problem? *Helloooo!* He could have stolen our credit card numbers!" she stood up dramatically and gestured to the still yelling waiter who had begun to rip off his apron and throw his tons of pens at people.

"Oh please, you've never once flashed that piece of plastic since the day we dated." He rolled his eyes and ignored her as he watched the police arrive.

Her face grew grim as she watched him look around the room. She turned to the officer, stepping in front of him.

"Sir, he's the guy you want." She pointed to Dylan, and quickly walked off.

The officer quickly grabbed ahold of Dylan, who was shocked and felt like his feet grew roots into the ground. The last thing he saw of her was her back as she walked out of the coffeehouse.



The Strong One

Madison Liebler



I rolled over to my other side and groaned. The beeping wouldn't stop. Groggy, I opened my eyes and reached for my ringing phone. Blinded momentarily, I squinted at the screen. It was 1:23 a.m. I answered, grumbling,

"Hello?"

"Come outside. Now."

"Katy? What? Why?"

"I'm in your driveway already. Get up. We're going for ice cream."

"What!?" I sighed and sat up in bed, leaning over to reach my glasses on the bedside table. "Katy, it's almost two a.m. I'm not going for ice cream. Not now."

"Yes. You. Are." She said each word separately, ordering me in her best "parenting" voice. "You're my best friend. It's your job to make sure I'm properly fed."

I knew it was useless. When Katy wanted something, she got it.

"Can't we go tomorrow?" I have school in the morning. We have school." I struggled to find a pair of jeans in the darkness, unwilling to risk the light.

The phone was silent for a moment.

"Katy?"

"It has to be tonight." Her words seemed to rush through the phone, jumbled in her haste.

I hesitated, pulling down my t-shirt and looking at my phone. She didn't sound like my best friend. There was a desperate edge to her voice.

“Okay. Give me a minute.”

When I had snuck past my parent’s room and into the hall I paused, catching my reflection in the mirror by the light of my phone shining in front of me. I grimaced. My hair was a mess, frizzy around my face. I hadn’t put any makeup on, and the girl looking back at me was defined only by her square glasses and eye bags. Choosing to ignore my appearance, I made my way out the door swiftly, moving towards the headlights of Katy’s Grand am.

My head bumped the roof as I ducked to step into the car. Katy had the car moving almost before my butt hit the seat.

“Jesus!” Rubbing the back of my head I grumbled, “Let me get my seatbelt on. What’s the rush?”

I glanced up from my now seatbelted lap to look at her. She was staring ahead as she pulled out of the driveway, her fingers tapping at the wheel. She looked like she hadn’t slept yet. Her hair was up in a messy bun and she wore the same clothes that she had at school. Still, she looked beautiful. I felt a pang of jealousy.

“I’m just hungry. You know me.” Her voice was steady, but she remained staring straight ahead, neck and shoulders tensed, both hands gripping the wheel. In the light of a passing car I noticed the worried creases between her eyebrows.

“You’ve never needed me to buy ice cream with you before.” I refused to look away from her, searching for the real reason I wasn’t in bed right now. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Of course I am.” She cracked a small smile, but reached for the dial, turning on the radio.

I let it go for the moment, turning my head towards the road. The music filled the silence and I listened while my eyes roamed the dirt road ahead of us. We reached a stop sign and Katy began to turn left.

“Shouldn’t you have turned right? Lizzie’s is open all night.”

“No. We’re driving past town. Into Imlay city at least.”

“Imlay city?” Surprised, I looked over at her again. “That’s forty minutes away.”

She remained silent but her lips pursed in a frown, eyebrows

pushing closer together. I had known Katy for six years now. She was one of the strongest people I knew and rarely showed any vulnerability, but I knew how to read her better than anyone, and she knew it.

“Katy... Just tell me.”

I saw her face crumple then in a rare sign of weakness. Her lips opened and she seemed to struggle to find words. My heart beat faster and I reached towards her to touch her shoulder.

“Pull over. Let’s talk. It’ll be okay, I promise.”

She nodded and brought the car to a stop on the side of the road. She took a shaky breath and began.

As I listened I watched her face closely. For as long as I had known her, she had been the comforting one, the strongest of us both by far. I remembered now, the way she looked when her first boyfriend had broken her heart, or her father’s casket was lowered into the ground. Her chin lifted, eyes straight ahead. Stoic and proud. Always. As I looked at her now I felt fear twist in my gut. What had happened to make her lose herself like this? The occasional tear slid down her cheeks now as she spoke almost frantically.

“And... and he didn’t stop. I told him... I didn’t think he would...” She seemed to almost choke on the words. She didn’t look at me when she spoke, she looked down at her hands, twisting in her lap. The car was cold and quiet now.

“I tried, Emma. I tried to push him off but...” She took a deep breath and looked at me with tired eyes. “Emma, I need a pregnancy test.”

I didn’t speak. Only stared at her. I didn’t understand. I don’t know how Katy took my silence, but she silently wiped her face and sat up. Without a word she started the car again and began driving.

“When?”

Katy jumped a little. The car was quiet still and the word had come out louder than I had meant.

“Three weeks ago.”

“Three weeks!?! Katy...” I looked at her in disbelief. “He’s still in school. I saw him today.. You-”

“No. You can’t tell anyone. I don’t want anyone to know.”

"But, Katy... What if he does it to someone else?"

She glanced at me. "He won't. He was drunk. It.. It was an accident. I should have-"

"No. Katy it wasn't your fault." She nodded slowly.

We were silent for the rest of the drive. Katy seemed braver, more herself when we reached the door of the gas station. She marched ahead of me, straight to the back isle. I caught up with her to find her with a box already in her hand. The sight shocked me a little. For the first time I looked at her and imagined a baby in her arms, or her pregnant belly in her cheerleaders uniform. This wasn't right.

She was looking at the front of the store, where a large man was waiting at behind the counter. She was hesitating. I took the box from her hands and moved towards the man. I kept my chin up and my gaze forward.

Katy was waiting for me next to the bathroom. I handed her the box. She moved forward and wrapped me in a hug. I held her for a moment not knowing what she needed now. She let go and turned to open the bathroom door but not before I saw the fear in her eyes.

I thought about what would happen when she came out of the bathroom. I thought about the power one little stick had, how her life, our lives would change if it was positive. I wondered if i'd have to protect her from the whispers of our friends or from the stares of strangers. I wondered if she would keep the baby or if she'd...

I shook my head and walked towards the freezer section in the corner of the store. I wouldn't worry now. I grabbed a quart of mint chocolate chip. If I had to, I'd be the strong one, but for the next few minutes, we were just seventeen. We'd eat an entire quart of ice cream in the car on the way home. We'd play the music loud and sing along. We'd laugh. The bathroom door opened, I put on a smile.

Ignorance is Bliss

Wade Holcomb

"Greg, come here and take a look at this," Jerry said as he motioned toward the television. Greg was 25, with dark hair trimmed tightly against his scalp, thin and handsome. He made his way over to the couch from the kitchen and took a seat where Jerry was perched. Jerry was the same age, but had bright blond hair that hung scraggly over his brow. As he sat, Greg saw that it was the 5 o'clock news with Janice Swanson. She was a pretty woman, in her late twenties, with long auburn hair that just barely touched the shoulders of her electric blue blazer. Greg noticed a serious look on her face as she read the breaking news.

"In today's top stories, the So-Cal Stabber and the Venice Beach Viper have struck again. The Stabber has claimed the life of a Tamara Taylor, a 42 year old woman from Holister..."

"Bullshit she was 42!" Jerry blurted.

"What?" Greg turned to him.

"Nothing," Jerry said with his head bowed slightly. *She said she was 23. She looked 23. Damnit!* He thought.

"...she was found, separated limb from limb, beneath an underpass along the 405 last night by a local homeless man. Her wounds coincided with those associated with the other Stabber victims. It has been determined that her time of death would have been between 8pm and 10pm..."

"Wait a minute..." Greg turned, brow furrowed, "weren't you on the 405 around that time last night?"

Jerry stiffened and his eyes widened to the size of half-dollars. "L...uh...no! Hey! Isn't Janice hot? I would do some *nasty* things to her, I tell ya." Jerry added quickly, nodding with an idiotic grin waiting for Greg to agree.

"I guess so..." Greg said as he turned back to the TV.

“...then, in West Hollywood, the body of one Albert Owens, 45, was found dead and mutilated with the Venice Beach Viper’s signature note. The LAPD is working diligently to crack the cipher...”

“Come on! It wasn’t that difficult!” This time Greg was the one who shouted.

“What the hell was that?” Jerry questioned.

“Nothing...” Greg remained focused on the TV. “Fuck off, Jerry!”

Jerry put his hands up in a light surrender, and looked back to the news.

“...the LAPD are still trying to piece together the trail to these monsters, but we should retain hope that our city’s time of darkness.”

Jerry clicked off the news and chuckled to himself. *They called me a monster!* Greg stood up and returned to the kitchen, while Jerry picked up the newspaper off of the coffee table.

“Isn’t it strange,” Jerry called into the kitchen, “that LA happens to have *two* prolific serial killers active at the same time?”

“Huh...I guess you’re right,” Greg replied as he took a bite from his lunch. *I wonder, he thought, if I’ll ever run into this “Stabber.”* He shook his head gently and walked back over to the couch.

Next to him, Jerry remained leafing through the paper. His eyes fell on an article entitled, “The ‘So-Cal Stabbers’ List of Victims.” He suppressed a smile as he scrolled through the list. He counted a total of ten. His laughter was uncontainable at this point, and he threw his head back in glee. *They only have ten? They’re missing about five!*

“What is so damn funny?” Greg asked through a mouthful of pastrami.

Jerry quickly shuffled the paper through his fingers and managed a strained response, “Oh! It’s just Marmaduke. He thinks he’s people!”

“Whatever Jerry,” Greg rolled his eyes as he wiped some mustard from the corner of his mouth.

Jerry relaxed and sighed into the pages. He turned the page back

and he noticed a second list just below his own. This one was called, “The ‘Venice Beach Viper’s’ List of Victims.” He scrolled through the second list and counted a total of 17 victims. *17? 17! And that’s just the one’s they know about! How can that hack who still leaves a riddle with his victims have more than me! That’s it! I’m going hunting.* He folded the paper neatly and placed it back on the coffee table. He stood up and strode to the door.

“Where are you going?” Greg asked

“Oh, I’m just a bit bored. I might pop over to O’Halligan’s Pub.”

“I’m bored too, I’ll come with you,” Greg said as he started to stand.

“NO!” Jerry shouted. “No, no, no...I’m actually meeting someone. A lady someone.”

“Whatever,” Greg sat back down, “I don’t know who’d ever fuck you, but good luck anyway.”

Jerry opened the door and stepped into the hallway of their building. He took a deep breath. *That was close! Why does he always want to tag along? How needy do you have to be? Damn!*

With the door shut, Greg wiped his face once more, took his dishes to the kitchen sink, and walked to his bedroom down the hall. He opened his door to see the naked woman he had left there earlier that morning, strapped to his headboard. Her long brunette hair was matted with blood, and her mouth was bound with duct tape from cheek to cheek. Sweat beaded on her brow and fell into her blue eyes.

With the door closed behind him, Greg turned back toward the woman, “Damn, that was close. Have you ever had a roommate that you know just *has* to have something wrong them?” The girl, still frightened, shook her head. “I just can’t quite put my finger on it.” He shook his head. “He’s just so *weird!* I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s mutilating squirrels in his bedroom, or something.” He turned toward his dresser and donned some latex gloves. He grabbed a syringe and a bottle from the top drawer. He poked the needle through the top, and the girl screamed and shouted behind the tape. Greg rolled his eyes, “I know, I’m a little weird myself, but he takes the

fucking cake!” She continued her muffled screaming and shook her head vigorously. He took a seat next to her on the bed, “Now, get this! He always leaves his dishes in the fucking sink! Never washes them!” He noticed the look of terror on her face, “I know, right? Anyway, I’m going to kill you now.” Her screams intensified behind her gag, and her limbs struggled against her restraints. “Now, now,” Greg added in a deadpan voice, “I can’t be held accountable for the fact that you wandered ever so willingly into my trap. Would you blame the spider for the death of the fly? Would you blame the lion for the death of the lamb? Well, would you?” Her voice still muffled as she attempted to respond. Greg turned his face to the needle, then back to her, “Exactly! I’m just smarter than you. That’s really not so bad, is it? Consider me your teacher. I’m teaching you that you shouldn’t fall head-over-heels for a man you met online, who claims he is a ‘hopeless romantic’ that ‘loves to cook and cuddle,’ who also happens to be a ‘musician by day, lover by night.’ How do you think that guy exists!” He pulled a marker out of his pocket and scrawled a “x” on her chest, above her heart. “You should be thanking me,” he added as he flicked the needle, “I’m removing some chlorine from the gene pool.” With one swift and deliberate movement, he thrust the needle into the woman’s chest.

* * *

The evening turned amber around Jerry as he walked the street. O’Halligan’s was just up ahead, and it was his favorite bar in Los Angeles. He claimed it was because of their selection of craft beer, but the reality was the people were just more trusting there than anywhere else. He approached the heavy oak door beneath the green neon lights and pulled it open. He walked through the crowd and took a seat at the corner of the bar.

“Hey, Jerry! What can I get for ya?” It was Thomas, the bartender.

“I’ll just have a whiskey and ginger ale,” Jerry replied.

“Whiskey? Must have been a rough day, huh?”

“Eh, just thought I’d change it up a bit.”

Thomas nodded and grabbed a glass. Jerry turned around in his seat to scan the room. Two men, sloshed something fierce, stood propping themselves up with the wall, haphazardly waving their partially full beer mugs while they told each other stories of work or wives. Then, a group of three people, no more than an average age of 25, were sitting at a table a few strides away from the dartboards. They all had a random assortment of drinks. One woman, about 23, that had a cocktail that looked like it was made from a ground up fairy, was smiling and laughing along with her two friends. Her friends, two men, were trying their damndest to impress her. One of them, about 27, was drinking what looked like an Old Fashioned that he particularly did *not* enjoy, yet he continued to drink it because he presumably felt that he *should* like it. The other, about 21, was drinking a craft beer, but made a major point of asking for a sample before each pint, then put on a whole production about the “hoppiness” and the “IBUs,” as if to say, “You should pick me to sleep with because look how sophisticated my palate is!”

Jerry heard a glass being set down on the bar in front of him, and turned to see Thomas with his whiskey.

“Ya know,” Jerry began as he grabbed his whiskey from the bar, “sometimes Greg just gets on my nerves.”

“That’s what you get when you find a roommate on Craigslist,” Thomas added as he smugly wiped a glass dry with his bar towel.

“I get that, but he’s not *terrible*,” Jerry added, mixing his drink. “He does keep the toilet paper stocked. He always happens to have duct tape. He volunteers to do my laundry. But, sometimes, he’s just so annoying! Every morning, when he combs his hair, he leaves piles of the stuff on the counter and in the sink! It’s a wonder he isn’t bald.” Jerry took another sip. “I guess it’s just a small price to pay for all that he does around the apartment.”

Thomas nodded in agreement and walked to the other side of the bar where he had two new customers. Jerry turned his eyes back to the woman by the dartboards. *She is clearly not interested in those two. Can’t say I blame her. I think I’ll help her get rid of these dumbasses.* He started to stand, but was interrupted by Thomas.

"I almost forgot to ask! What happened with that girl the other night?"

Jerry sat down his drink, "Dude, she was 42! How the hell did you ever think she was 23 and set her up with me?"

Thomas dropped his towel and covered his mouth, "She was 42? Well, she looked damn good for 42, if you ask me."

"She got super clingy and wouldn't shut up about her cat. I couldn't handle it."

"Don't worry," Thomas added adamantly, "She probably won't come back here again."

Jerry choked on his drink. *Oh God, I hope she doesn't come back! Then I'd have some explaining to do...and maybe some sewing.* He grabbed some napkins off of the bar, composed himself, and walked over to the young lady. He gently took her hand in his, kissed the back of it, and said, "Excuse me, darling, but may I buy you a drink?"

Her cheeks turned flush instantly and she hid her face in her free hand. Her suitors were not as impressed. They both shared a look of blind fury mixed with utter confusion. After a pause, she finally responded, "I'd love to!"

With her frozen friends left behind, she followed him to the bar. They took a seat as Jerry signaled for Thomas. They discussed her life, and Jerry found out that her name was Melissa, she was a nursing student at UCLA, she had two cats, and she rarely went out to the bars, but her two friends had convinced her tonight. Jerry went on to tell her that his name was Julian (he knew that she would not survive long enough to tell anyone his real name, but it allowed him to get into character), and that he was a travel writer (a dream of his that had never come to fruition, but he liked to live the lie). After a few hours of Jerry's little show, he convinced Melissa to come home with him. They got into a cab, made small talk during the short drive to his apartment.

"I've never done anything like this before," Melissa coyly admits as they approached his front door.

"Don't worry," Jerry added as he puts his key into the lock, "you

won't feel a thing."

"What?" Her eyes blew open as every muscle tensed.

"Nothing," he added as the door swung open. "We should keep quiet. My roommate's home." The two tiptoed past Greg's closed bedroom door. The light glowed beneath the door, and the sounds of his favorite band, Queen, were muffled through the door. *Okay, I'm good. He's busy working.* He opened his own bedroom door and ushered her in.

"Wow, I love your room!" Melissa said with starry-eyed wonder. Jerry knew his room was amazing, he made sure of it. It was all a part of the plan. He decorated the room with candles on the dresser and end table, and he had incense burning on the window sill. These were all things that he claimed were "instant panty-melters."

"I'll be right back," Jerry said as he ducked out of his room and Melissa took a seat at the edge of his bed. Jerry returned with two glasses of Cabernet. He handed one of the glasses to her with a wink. This time, her blush turned the color of the wine. He turned around to dim the lights and moved over to his dresser. There, he flicked on his stereo and filled the room with the dulcet tones of Marvin Gaye.

"Oh my God, that is so cheesy!" Melissa blurted through her smile.

"You love it," Jerry added as he danced his way over to her. Melissa could not hold in her excitement, and she giggled uncontrollably. He met her at the bed, sat beside her, and raised his glass for a toast. "Here's to those that wish us well, and those who don't can go to hell." Melissa giggled again behind her glass, and she downed the glass in one gulp. "Take it easy! That's some strong stuff."

"Don't worry, I've had wine before." Melissa leaned in for a kiss.

Jerry pulled back, "That's not the stuff that I'm talking about."

"What?"

"Well, I put about 6 Quaaludes in your glass. The plan was that you would gradually sip that, we could have some fun, and by the end you'd be dead to the world. Then you'd just be dead, because I'm going to kill you," Melissa stiffened at Jerry's remark, "and you might

be wondering why I'm telling you all of this right now, but if my calculations are correct, you will pass out in 5...4...3...2..." and she fell unconscious at the foot of his bed. "Damn! Just one second off. Still pretty good."

Jerry knelt down and scooped the sleeping beauty into his arms, then tossed her onto the bed. She bounced off and landed on the floor on other side. *She's really out cold*, he thought. He made his way to her on the floor and shoved her onto the bed. He walked over to the mirror above his dresser, adjusted his tie, and went over to his closet. He found his old wooden shoe-shine kit, and opened it to reveal a selection of expertly crafted knives, ranging from the small (used for removing fingers, eyes, and anything else small) to the comically large (used for when he felt extra frisky and decided to hack off entire limbs). He analyzed each knife and decided to go with his scaling knife (it made just the *niciest* little wounds when inserted). He pulled the knife from its sheath, and caught his eyes in the steel. He held his gaze in the blade, for what seemed like an eternity. *Wow...how long has that poppy seed been in my teeth? Since my bagel this morning? Ick!*

Jerry slinked out of the closet, and stood at the edge of the bed. *Right where I left you.* He flipped the unconscious woman back over onto her back and scanned her body. *Should the first stab go in the eye? No, no, that's too dramatic. In the heart? No, where's the fun in that? The stomach! Brilliant!* He slid her dress up under her breasts, and stared at her navel. *Might as well be a bullseye.* He raised his knife, kissed the blade, and plunged it into her stomach.

* * *

The following morning, Greg's alarm went off and startled him. He slammed his fist on the clock, rolled back over, and caught a glimpse of the gigantic black garbage bag that occupied the space between his bed and his bathroom door. Random lumps stretched the lining of the bag that rested in a heap on the floor. *Huh...I probably should have put her legs in the bottom and the head on top. Nah, that's not it. I should have cut the legs up even more. Five leg pieces are just not enough.* He shook his head and threw his comforter from himself. He lazily sauntered towards the bathroom, and patted the garbage bag

on his way. He stepped into the shower and was brought back into the moment from his sleepy haze by the sound of, what he could only describe as, a break dancing elephant coming from Jerry's room. He shirked it off and carried on with his shower.

Once done, he threw on some old sweatpants and a sweatshirt with the logo of a college he had never attended, grabbed the garbage bag, and opened his bedroom door. At that moment, Jerry had opened his own bedroom door, holding an identical garbage bag. They stood there, staring at each other, waiting for the other to make the first move.

"What are you doing with a garbage bag?" Greg broke the silence.

"I could ask you the same thing," Jerry added.

"Fuck off, Jerry," Greg ducked his head and dragged the bag out into hallway.

"No, really, what is it?" Jerry demanded.

"I did some late night cleaning because my room was getting to the point where I couldn't walk to the bathroom without my feet looking like the grease trap in a sink. Are you happy now?" Greg rolled his eyes and continued to drag his bag.

"Okay, that's just gross." Jerry reached down to pick up his bag.

"Well, what about you?" Greg stopped and stared Jerry down.

Jerry froze. His hand hovered over the black knot on the top of the bag. "Uh...um...the same as you! I did some cleaning too. It was pretty bad in there."

"That's bullshit and you know it," Greg confronted him.

"Hey!" Jerry defended, "I didn't say anything when Mrs. Chittister's dog went missing and its collar ended up on our couch. I didn't care because that little shit kept yapping all hours of the night and I was just relieved to finally have a full night's sleep."

"Touché," Greg responded. "Let's just leave things be." They nodded in kind, and continued to walk to the door.

"Why does your bag sound so squishy?" Jerry asked.

"I said fuck off!" Greg yelled.

They silently walked to the dumpster and deposited their bags, not once making eye contact. Jerry started to walk back toward the building, but Greg froze. *I can't leave this bag here. That will easily be tracked back to me. I should take this out to Encino...*

"Know what, I'll meet you back upstairs. I think I'm going to have a cigarette," Greg nervously uttered.

Jerry stopped, turned, "You don't smoke."

"There's shit you don't know about me, Jerry! Leave me alone!" Greg screamed at him.

Jerry rolled his eyes, turned, and walked back into the building. Greg reached over the lip of the dumpster and retrieved his bag. He dragged the bag through the parking lot to his car. He never locked the doors, so he just opened it. He went to lift the bag into his back seat, but he realized how light the bag was. He turned and saw body parts strewn through the parking lot, leading back to the dumpster. *Oh no...OH NO! What do I do...what do I do?* Once the idea manifested itself in his head, he ran over to the dumpster. He grabbed a white garbage bag from inside and distributed its contents throughout the dumpster. Quickly and nervously, Greg swept the woman's body parts into the new bag with his hands. Once the bag made its way into his car, Greg shut the door and leaned against the side of the car. No one was around to see, so after a deep breath, he stepped away and walked up the steps to his apartment.

At the door, Greg swung it open and stepped inside. He turned into the kitchen. The stress from his garbage collecting adventure left him feeling hungrier than usual. He stepped over to the toaster and put a bagel inside, and turned to the fridge for the cream cheese. He stopped as he saw that some red liquid was dripping out from the bottom and onto the linoleum.

"Jer, why is the fridge dripping?"

"TOMATOES!" Jerry shouted from the living room. He rushed into the kitchen and placed himself between Greg and the door. "It's just some bad tomatoes I got yesterday from the farmer's market.

Don't open the door or it will smell awful in here."

"But you hate the farmer's market. You say they're just hippies trying to sell you their kale smoothies and their hemp grocery bags." Greg responded.

"I've actually changed my mind," Jerry's tone was overly sincere. "I actually like kale now. Yeah, the health benefits totally outweigh the pretentiousness. Don't worry, I'll clean up the mess." Greg sighed and walked back into his room. *Thank God he didn't open that fridge. It would have been a little awkward for him to see Melissa's head. I didn't have the chance to introduce them yet.* He chuckled to himself again as he flopped down onto the recliner.

* * *

Greg sat down on the couch and flipped on the news. He was in good spirits this morning, since Jerry was not around last night to stomp around. In fact, Jerry had not been around in weeks. Greg noticed, but decided not to press the issue because it allowed him to get more work done, sleep better, and actually keep his duct tape. He kicked his feet up on the coffee table, sipped his cup of coffee, and watched Madison McGillicuddy deliver the morning news.

"Well, last night, another victim of the Venice Beach Viper was found in Encino. She was mutilated almost beyond recognition. It was the body of Lynn Sacamano, 22, of Hollywood. Her limbs were found scattered beneath an underpass, following the pattern of his other victims. Another cryptic note was found along with the body, and the LAPD has yet to crack it. None of the Viper's messages have been decoded, but the LAPD believe they are close to a breakthrough."

Greg scoffed. *This is getting to be a little ridiculous. I made this last letter even easier to solve than the last ones!* He took another sip of coffee and settled back into the couch.

"Even with this depressing news," Madison continued, "there is a spark of hope. One of the two notorious serial killers plaguing the greater Los Angeles area has been captured. Jerry Weidenbach, or as he has been called, the 'SoCal Stabber,' has been apprehended. He

was captured at a local bar, O'Halligan's, after an anonymous tip. He has so far remained silent on the murders, but he has been credited with 16 murders in total."

The cup that was in Greg's hand fell to the floor, and coffee spilled all over his slippers. His jaw was residing somewhere in the vicinity of his knees as he stared at the television. In waves, laughter flowed over him until he was drowning in a sea of guffaws. He had never laughed this hard in his life. But as quickly as the laughter had come, it was replaced with stunned silence and clenched cheeks. With a shaking hand, Greg reached for the remote and switched off the TV. *Oh no...if they caught him...that will lead the police...HERE!*

He shot bolt upright and ran towards his room. He grabbed a suitcase and stuffed anything he could find that had any importance to him into it. He grabbed his duct tape, his industrial sized plastic sheets, his needles, and threw them in the suitcase and ran for the door. He slammed it behind him and ran towards his car. He turned around to take one last look at his apartment building. *LA is a beautiful city.* He sat down in the driver's seat, closed the door, and drove off and got on the 405.

* * *

"Good evening Toronto, I'm Trish Turner, and here's the 6 o'clock news. Dead bodies have been found in downtown Toronto, dismembered, and containing a cryptic note with each one. With seven victims found so far, he has become the most prolific serial killer in Toronto's recent history. He has been dubbed the 'Canadian Jack the Ripper.' The RCMP has been working diligently to crack the code and bring this monster to justice. If anyone knows of any leads concerning the Canadian Ripper or his victims, please call..."

Finding Joy

Maria Vallee

Earlier this morning, on a busy Tuesday in April, Hannah was on a bus riding to work. The pretty young woman felt hopeless: overworked, underpaid, overtired, and very stressed. Her thoughts kept travelling to the stack of bills on her kitchen counter that only seemed to grow. The newest was going to be a towing bill. One second, her little Focus was fine. The next, it was stopped in the middle of the road, blocking angry drivers who had somewhere to be. She knew the moment the engine started to sputter that she'd be late to her tedious job; Hannah hadn't missed a day in two years. She called Jane, her flawless boss, to explain the situation. Jane showed her anger at not getting the article that was due that day. That's why Hannah ended up on an old, grey bus. She cringed from the smell of morning breath coming from the person squeezed next to her on the right and instantly noted that he was sporting bed head to match the

whole "I just woke up" appearance. She was also trying to avoid the glassy-eyed stare from the old lady that was too close for comfort on her left. To make the day even better, the heavy dark clouds finally burst. The rain guaranteed that not a single ray of sunlight would get through on this gloomy day.

Hannah's narrowed eyes roamed the bus in yet another attempt to shift the glassy eyes in another direction, when she noticed the person across the aisle from her. He looked like a kid, maybe in college, with beat-up shoes and a backpack full of books. She instantly felt pity for him. Her stomach turned over, as she remembered her student loan bill, also on her counter. Now, Hannah was the one staring, as she tried to figure out why he had a smile on his face. It bugged her to think about his happiness, while she was drowning in her own misery.

She looked away and tried to push her negative feelings for the stranger's attitude out of her mind. She crossed her legs, smoothed her black pencil skirt, and surveyed more passengers

on the bus ride from Hell. A piercing cry of “Mmooommm!” sounded through the air, which caused the bus to jerk just a little. Hannah smiled when she saw the mom’s pinched mouth and hard face attempting to control her two bickering children. She felt strangely satisfied with the misery of the woman she’d never seen before. She felt the same way after she observed a shifty looking business man attempting to wipe dirt from his shoes, and an old couple who didn’t seem to enjoy the company of each other. Everyone was miserable like her, except for that kid.

Hannah was still racking her brain for some reason the kid was happy. She let her own unhappiness consume her, and she couldn’t even enjoy the sound of Katy Perry’s “Roar” that played softly in the background, which the college kid was tapping his foot to. She broke out of her thoughts when a rotten egg smell filled her nose.

“Hi, I’m Joe,” grumbled the passenger sitting next to her. “Welcome to the bus.”

Hannah drew back from his approaching hand, afraid to breathe. Suddenly, she was

jolted forward, and heard a creak, followed by a rush of cool, damp air. Seizing the opportunity, she rushed out the door.

In Hannah’s panic, she didn’t stop to think about where she was. An older man on the street trying to collect donations for foster children, watched the poor lady’s makeup melt off her face, and clothes become darker, as she paced around, asking people where she was. Finally, seeing enough, he walked over to her, and explained she was on the corner of 75th and State. With a sigh, she realized she’d only gotten off the bus one stop early. Hannah studied the man; he was the only one who didn’t ignore her, or say “outta the way!”

“Thank you!” She said to him gratefully, as she began to hurry off in the direction his wrinkled hand was pointing.

“Here,” he held out an old umbrella to the dripping girl.

“I—I can’t take that,” Hannah started to protest.

“Really, it’s okay. I have another one right over there.”

She glanced around in distrust; there was no umbrella in sight. But his eyes were kind, and

she gave into the gesture.

The old man watched her hurry off with his umbrella.

“Frank, what’d you do that for—giving away your umbrella? Now you’re going to be drenched,” his wife asked, accusingly.

“It’s just a light sprinkle now. I’ll keep under the tent. Besides, she needs it more than I do.”

Hannah was finally able to breathe a sigh of relief. She felt like things were halfway looking up for her, when she thought of that kid who was already happy. “I wanna wipe the happy thoughts outta his mind,” she mumbled. A lady walking near her on the busy sidewalk gave a worried glance in Hannah’s direction, and angled herself away. Hannah was taken aback by her own thought, but she took another breath, and brought the ratty umbrella closer to her face to protect what was left of her hair. She was still on the path to work, feeling more miserable every second.

Halfway there, Hannah almost smiled when she realized that in less than ten minutes her boss would have the article on

her desk, even if it was two hours late.

“Move!” Someone yelled behind Hannah, but it was too late. A young guy on a bike soared past, jostling her and a few others off the path and into a short alley. The middle-aged woman looked furious as she shot back onto the sidewalk. The older lady looked disgusted as she glanced at Hannah, then continued as well. Hannah felt her chest tighten, and her eyes water as she looked down at her expensive, black tote bag soaked through, along with all her papers inside. She looked up towards the raindrops that fell lightly from the angry, grey clouds, and let them blend with her tears. Hannah stood at the edge of the alley; she glanced at the busy sidewalk and saw frustrated people splash their way through puddles. She bet nobody felt worse than her.

After she gained what was left of her composure, Hannah made a move to leave the alley and become part of the heavy stream of human traffic, when a small sound from the corner of the alley pulled her back. It was the mew of a tiny cat. Hannah didn’t care very much; the

thought of all the strays in this city alone made her disgusted for what felt like the 100th time that day. But the look in the tabby's dull, green eyes drew Hannah closer.

"You look as hopeless as I feel," Hannah told the pitiful creature, as she crouched down closer, "and now I see why," she finished, watching the dark lumps move around the new mama who had just given birth. The cat simply wanted to save her babies, but was all alone in the world. That's something Hannah could understand.

She thought quickly about what her options were. First, she decided to grab an empty box that was in the alley to cover up the cat. After the heavy, wet cardboard fell apart in her hands, she knew it wouldn't work. As if a light bulb went off, Hannah knew her problems didn't compare to the cat's. She pulled out her phone and mustered up her courage.

"Jane?... Yeah, I'm so sorry, my car still isn't done, and I'm just not able to get to work today, but I'm going to send you my article as soon as I get home...I know it's not the official copy, but

to make up for my tardiness I'll stay late tomorrow....And the rest of the week, too."

Hannah took a deep breath, and praised herself for her bravery. She looked down at the cat, and couldn't help but smile when she saw it staring up at her.

Anyone who saw Hannah later that day would have described her as a crazy cat lady. She put the squirming, blind babies in her umbrella, and added the mama cat last. She carried them in her arms back the way she came, while her phone guided her to the nearest shelter. Still far from happy, Hannah couldn't stop thinking about that poor kid on the bus who found a reason to smile. This cat was her light, and the thought of their happiness helped her find joy.



Mallory Tempeste Mavys

I rushed through the door. One hand held to my face and the other up and grasping my hair once it got done fumbling with the doorknob. "Hazi?" I asked, looking from the living room to the kitchen then heading down the hallway.

"Yeah?" I heard her voice chime from the bedroom I was a moment from entering.

"I know it's late, sorry."

"It's okay," she mumbled as she reached for her nightstand lamp and flicked it on.

I put my key back in my pocket and laid down next to her and she turned towards me. "Did it get bad again Mallory?" she asked.

"Yes."

She flopped her arm across my torso. She was too tired to do much for me, but that was fine. To be safe and in her bed instead of in my own was enough. I wiped my face off and sighed, feeling what seemed to be my insides relaxing. My lungs and my guts all went limp into the sheets and I could breathe again.

"Should call the police," she rubbed my shoulder, "I can."

I tilted my head back some, no more tears for me. "I can't call the police on my own father."

"I can."

"I can't let you call the police on my own father."

"It's getting worse."

"You're Christian. What happened to honoring thy father?"

She grunted. "What happened to it is I back handed it out the bible once it started causing all this," she made sloppy circles around my face with her beautifully dark and manicured finger.

And she was right. But I didn't answer.

I.

It was a different day, weeks later. I just got home from high school and I was alone and free to lounge around the house wherever I pleased. I brought lunch to the living room and turned on the tv, sitting on the floor, comfortable but ready to dash the moment I heard an engine.

But after an hour it wasn't an engine that I heard first. It was the slamming of my backdoor. Without my usual warning I was a deer in headlights. With my heart in my throat and my mouth wide open I could only drop my

plate to free my hands and stare up at my father as he stood at the edge of the carpet, wiping the oil from his hands, staring down at me. He had been working on the car outside.

“Why are you eating out here?” he asked me and I couldn’t speak. “God damn it Mallory, I’ve been working all day and now I have to come inside and clean up after you?”

“I,” my hands lifted to my chest, palms getting ready to face him, “I.”

It was too late to say anything though, but I suppose it was never not too late to say anything. His belt cracked against my face and my body whipped to the side, a lifeless heap. Playing dead never stopped him. I doubt even being actually dead would make him hesitate. He picked me up by my shirt collar and the back of his hand clipped my other cheek.

The smack stung. He was always good at getting that sharp *thwack*. I almost screamed, but I knew that would make things worse. I jerked my legs up and threw my arms around, trying to get out of his grasp, but I was a paperclip to him. My boney body wasn’t going anywhere. I grit my teeth and sobbed.

II.

I was thinking about that day awhile later. Dad had settled down for some reason this month. I wondered when the next attack would be. While it was nice to get a break it made my anxiety sky rocket.

The walk home was dreary and long. I was getting close and decided to take the window in instead of the door. I didn’t want him to see me. With all his steam collecting over this period, I couldn’t help but think that when he did get his hands on me again it would be for the last time.

I crawled in and landed softly on the wood floor. Right in front of the vent, the warm air was a warm welcome. I didn’t hear anything but the tv. Which was odd but I wasn’t going to look out of my room to see if he was home. Normally he’d be gone or snoring. He never hung around to watch tv.

I got in bed and let myself sigh. What a relief to get in without being noticed. I fell asleep after a bit.

I woke up hours later to the same noise. I had to turn the tv off, I thought. If he got home and thought that I left it on I was a goner.

I took a deep breath and got out of bed. But what if he is home? Each step I took to my door was slow and shaking. I



cleaned out my eyes and wiped my face before turning my door-knob. I needed to be alert.

The hall was empty. I took it an inch at a time. I could see the tv from the end of the hall but I couldn’t see the couch. I stood for a long time wondering if I should just turn back around. maybe I’d leave and go to Hazi’s house and come back tomorrow. That would be what she’d want.

But I didn’t. I poked just enough of one eye from behind the wall to see the rest of the room. And there he was.

Laying there quiet. His eyes weren’t open. I watched, looking for any signs of him being awake. I didn’t see anything. I went back to my room and laid back down.

My dad snored. He snored so much and bad that you’d hear it from any corner of the house or even the back yard. I’ve never seen him lounge on the couch to watch tv. If he wasn’t sleeping, he wasn’t home. He’d be at the bar or a women’s house or working outside. He didn’t like it in here.

I wanted to fall back asleep. My mission was over. He turned the tv on. I was safe. I should have gone to bed. But I didn’t.

I got back up and went back to the end of the hallway. With less hesitation this time. I watched him from behind the wall. The tv was the only light and it was dark and I couldn’t see

him perfectly, but I saw enough to know he was out.

I gulped and stepped closer. Then I fully revealed myself to the living room, and he didn’t move.

I didn’t dare to speak but I did dare to get even closer yet. It felt funny. I hadn’t been that close to my father willingly in over a year. How strange it was to exist in the same room as him.

The closer I got the surer I became and soon enough my shaky steps became confident strides, and I was before him.

And he didn’t move. Then I picked up his beer bottles off the ground and took them to the trash and came back. And he hadn’t moved.

Then I went to the phone and took it to the kitchen. I knew the number I was calling by heart, even if I had never dialed it before. I held the whole conversation there in what would have been my dad’s line of view, but he couldn’t see me. He was so passed out he was as good as dead.

I hung up then made another call.

“Hey,” Hazi said.

“Hi,” I tore my stare from my dad to the room around me, and I was smiling, “guess what I did.”

Stakes

Michaela Evans

Shaw disinfected mail on the Osteran lazaret. It was decent work for a knave from the coast slums, which said a lot about the general state of things. Every day, a tugboat from the mainland came bearing satchels from the courier's guild. At the onset of Shaw's employment, these shipments amounted to six or seven bags, each packed to bursting. More than eight months later, the mail primarily consisted of a dozen water stained documents, maybe less. This was almost entirely due to the plague gripping Osteran—though some of the blame could be placed on Arben, the tugboat captain, who was generally a disreputable man.

Shaw, who was also disreputable, didn't particularly mind her dwindling workload. The island was understaffed, so each morning she collected an agreeable stack of money and sat on a three-legged stool in the lazaret's chapter house, rifling through stacks of official looking letters with her sealskin gloves. She slit

them like fish, and because Shaw was really no good, she gutted the ones that looked interesting, and read them while the rest baked over charcoal fires.

Most were diplomatic letters from a smattering of the city's most tenacious chancellors. Each begged succor from the surrounding territories. Doctors in western Kestajn continued to donate Cures of varying potency, but it wasn't enough. Defying quarantine, the plague had finally eaten into Osteran's wealthiest districts. Like keg of spoilt wine, the empire barred its doors to the rest of the world and fermented from the inside out.

Shaw read these letters with a twisted lip, her wet feet steaming near the charcoal burner. Kestajn's bleeding heart brought Cure for Osteran, but not all of it. Contacts in the upper districts met her by the docks on Tuesdays. There was Stainton, who caught the plague last summer and lived. He was missing an eye and spoke through a rag he used in his work at the slaughterhouse. Tilly had two daughters, and sold her information when others couldn't. But more often than not, it was Ashlee she met

on the eastern wharf.

He was somewhere near twelve, tall and skinny like her nephew. Shaw traded him cigarettes for gossip, which was cheap, as far as secrets go. Ashlee told her the aristocrats who could still stand were clearing out of Osteran. They drank Kestajn's Cure morning, noon and night for three days, then departed with armed guardsmen through the city's military installations. Ashlee stared at the oily water with his sunken eyes and called them vermin, abandoning ship. Shaw thrust her hands into her pockets and told him to get lost.

Since Ashlee's visits, Shaw smoked less and read the military's mail more often. Most were rife with numbers. Requisition orders, or else tallies of the dead. Every once and a while, a letter bearing the Marshal's seal would pass through. Of course Shaw attempted to read them, but the administration had begun coding their letters by a cipher she didn't recognize.

Failure drove Shaw to drink, which was difficult to do on the lazaret. Often she abandoned her desk and rifled through the chapter house until she found a

bottle of communion wine—the priest's cough medicine was better, but he'd begun hiding it recently. Drinking from the bottle, Shaw wandered from window to window, taking stock of the tiny, dull lights on the far shore. After a while, they blurred into a single orange ribbon, and Shaw went to bed, wondering if Ashlee was selling her secrets for more cheap cigarettes.

One day, a letter came from outside the city, which was less unusual and more of an inconvenience for Shaw. Fumigating foreign letters was standard procedure, but incoming military mail couldn't be slit like the rest. Cursing under her breath, Shaw spent the next half hour steaming the glue from its envelope. The letter inside was marked with a protective seal, which would've been lucky for the sender, had Shaw not possessed a copy of the same stamp. Heating some wax, Shaw cut the letter open and read it while the priest pretended not to notice.

A few brief sentences declared the arrival of more Kestajan Cure. Shaw squinted at the details, chewing on one ragged nail. The letter made mention

of a ship, the *Adjudicator*. Shaw had seen it before, a cargo ship smaller and sleeker than most. It would reach Osteran in less than a week. Maybe even tonight, if the letter was old. Stuffing the document in her breast pocket, Shaw opened three heavy drawers in her work desk with the same rusted key. From them, she produced reams of yellowed paper and several vellum rosters. The priest muttered a quiet supplication in the background as Shaw tipped a box of tattered receipts off the desk. She spread the papers in the box's place, arranging them diagonal stacks.

After an hour of cross referencing almanacs, port ledgers and records stolen from the Guard's Academy, Shaw was reasonably certain she could guess the *Adjudicator's* crew down to its cabin boy. Among them was a man named Laurie Ferris, an old friend from the slums. Shaw recalled his disheveled hair and nervous hands.

Laurie used to run packages with her when they were Ashlee's age. They also stole trinkets for the Deft Street pawn broker, but that was another story. Laurie was clever like Shaw, and good

with his numbers. They were similar children, and thick as thieves could be, but Laurie had an uncle in the Marshall's barracks—a custodian by trade. Often he would help him scrub the grout and make the soldier's beds for a few spare coins. One day, he left and didn't come back. A rickshaw boy in the upper markets said he saw Laurie in a cadet uniform, marching near Northstation. He looked sorta squeamish, the boy said. Laurie always looks squeamish, Shaw replied, and spent the next day angrily braining rats with her slingshot.

Shaw rubbed her chin. It'd been years since she'd seen Laurie. Somehow, he slipped straight through her fingers and wound up overseas. She wondered how long he'd been working in Kestajn, and whether he'd still rub shoulders with old, shady friends. Shaw considered the benefits of having a contact in a clean city, and at once, the mail on her desk seemed incredibly trivial.

Shaw was tall and gaunt-faced, with a long crooked nose. Her coat hung off of her in odd angles, and when she wore a hat, most of what you saw was lank brown hair and a thin mouth



missing two teeth. Because of this, most of the lazaret's guards left her well alone. This was a bad decision on their part, since Shaw took the opportunity to abandon her workstation at odd hours.

During these excursions, Shaw usually posed as a dockworker. This was easily accomplished with the aid of a filthy herringbone cap and oilskin apron, which she won in a game of able-whackets on the boat ride over. There were no ships docked at the lazaret today, but Shaw cut an intimidating figure without the disguise, so she put it on anyway. Skulking about in her usual attire, it would be almost impossible to lure Laurie away from the ship—or board it, if it became necessary.

The priest watched her proceedings with watery eyes. Shaw felt one of the blades in her jacket and thought about worse case scenarios. She wanted very badly to chat with Laurie. Osteran was getting a bit gamey for her tastes. More of her contacts dropped dead every day, her money caches in the city were drying up, and fumigating mail for the crumbling empire was rapidly losing its luster. The *Adjudicator* could

smuggle her out of the city. Her nephew too, if Laurie was feeling generous. Shaw hoped he'd grown into a reasonable man. A few more of those, and she wouldn't need so many knives.

Shaw sat on the eastern wharf for the better part of two hours, waiting and watching. Cigarette butts from Ashlee's visits littered the wooden planks. She spent a while flicking them at the seagulls, which circled in enormous clouds over the steely water. They'd become carrion birds in recent years, fat and filthy from scavenging corpses in Osteran's burn pits. Shaw suspected they carried a bit of the plague themselves, which spelled trouble for much of the northern seaboard. She watched them wheel in the sky, a large, tattered death shroud, and thought that maybe she would venture inland, beyond Kestajn.

By the time the *Adjudicator* arrived, it was night. Shaw noticed it as a lack of stars, a rising blackness on the thin edge between sea and sky. It crashed closer, and she saw a few oil lamps twinkling on-deck. They meandered back and forth, disappearing between the masts like

fireflies in cattails. Shaw snuffed out her cigarette and moved a knife into her sleeve. The air was picking up, cutting mist from the water in thin, spiraling sheets. In the distance, a small skiff was lowered into the water. Shaw retreated into the shadows and waited for the forward party to arrive.

The men made port not far from where Shaw sat, carving splinters from a cargo box. They hailed the lazaret outpost with a shutter lamp and were received by several tolls from the chapter house's bronze bell.

Before the guardsmen could arrive and initiate quarantine procedures, Shaw moved abreast the group and began to parse them out. There were six, all dressed in Kestajn blue. A few wore the boot spurs and leather harness of the country's native guard, but most went undecorated—save the two men with Osteran circlets on their caps. One was tall, with sloped shoulders and a bad leg. The other was shorter than Shaw, but not terribly small. Oil lamps on the skiff illuminated his square jaw and broad hands. They reminded Shaw of Laurie's uncle. Maybe even Laurie him-

self.

Smiling grimly, she threw a pebble in the shorter man's direction. Shaw gave up her sling-shot years ago, but her aim remained sharp as ever. The pebble sailed through the air, ricocheted off of a button on the front of his woolen jacket, and immediately bounced back into the shadows where she crouched. While his companions remained undisturbed, the man flinched, his eyes darting down to the front of his coat, then towards the darkness where the rock had disappeared. The moment Shaw saw a familiar scar twisting through his left eyebrow, she peeled off one of her gloves edged into the light. Quickly, she flashed several signs at him with a thin, brown hand. Even if his Osteran Sign was rusty, *"It's Shaw. Get your ass over here,"* was fairly difficult to lose in translation.

Laurie blanched and cast a nervous look at his squad mates. A guardsman had arrived on the dock moments ago, and more than a few Kestajns had already departed to fill out the necessary paperwork. Shaw scowled and motioned again. *"Quickly, before they notice."*



After a moment, he smiled sheepishly and touched his cheek with a thumb and forefinger. *"Aye."*

As soon as Laurie rounded the boxes, Shaw grabbed him by the collar and marched them both over to the rusted iron ladder clinging to the side of the pier. After some cajoling, Laurie climbed down gingerly, slipping several times on the weathered rungs. Shaw followed more nimbly, sliding down the rails like a spider descending from its web.

Sidestepping foul-smelling waves, Shaw led them up the slimy rocks to a relatively dry patch hidden behind the pier's wooden support struts. The ground was charred there, as if host to many fires. Shaw ripped a faded poster off of a broken board and sat on it, lighting a new cigarette with a match she bummed off Laurie. Gulls cried overhead and he shuffled in place, rubbing at his arms despite his thick coat.

Shaw watched him for a moment, leaning back against the rocks. From here, she could hear a few raised voices. She ignored them and gestured with her cigarette. *"Sit."*

"Oh," Laurie said. "Sure, Shaw." He hunted for a clean place, found none, and awkwardly sank into the black ashes. He looked down at his lap, and she knew he was worried about getting his clothes dirty. Shaw spat into the waves and he flinched.

"Laurie Ferris. Thought you disappeared," she lied. "Thought you died."

Laurie's eyes turned bright. "Really? I'm sorry, Shaw. You know I almost did though. Deft Street was no place for me. You made it, and I knew you would, but I would've been dead in another year. Two, if my uncle stuck around." He stared at his hands. "The marshal liked my work in the barracks. Said I was cut for taking orders. He recruited me in July. No time to so goodbye to anybody, really."

Shaw took another drag. She didn't really miss Laurie, but it was nice if he thought she did. "Don't worry about it," she said. "I heard enough from the boys in Northstation. Squeaked out right before the storm hit, didn't you?"

"The plague," he whispered.

"That's the one."

There was guilt in the way

he sat, which was good for Shaw since guilty men gave excellent favors.

"It's been bloody disgusting in Osteran for years now," she sighed. "The slums are half empty. Poor line the burn pits. It'd be nice if the guardsmen weren't such bastards. They'll shoot you dead these days. Doesn't make work easy."

He wrung his hands. "What sort of work? You still fencing goods?"

"No, mostly information now. Been buying more than selling though. Bad for the pockets." Shaw stuck her fingers through hole in her jacket and smiled. Laurie laughed, but it was strained. "And you? Running Cure for Kestajn?"

"That's right."

"Hmm. Can't see much use in it, Laurie. Lots of dead aristocrats in Osteran. Even more have fled. Anyone with coin for the Cure is flecking cinders in the burn pits." Shaw never asked questions unless the conversation got dicey. Good people gave answers for free, especially if they didn't know what you were looking for. "If you ask me,

there's nothing left in this godforsaken city worth taking. Kestajn has to know that."

"Oh, but there is something worth taking! It just doesn't belong to Osteran," Laurie said, and Shaw leaned in to listen. "There's a Kestajn commissioner with a few friends in the market districts. They've been leaking information for weeks now, or else helping where the money's good. Thing is, they've stayed for too long. Someone must've broke protocol, and now they're sick up the entire chain of command. The commissioner's son, Har-ker Sturges? I hear he's already dead."

Shaw whistled low and Laurie bent forward, nodding his head eagerly. "A royal mess, hey? They sent the *Adjudicator* to clean up as best we can. We're laying supply lines up Ostaran. A fortnight of work, maybe less. See if we can't fish a few of the agents out before it's too late."

"A private operation then?"

"Something like it."

"Sounds important."

"Noble, more or less."

Shaw laughed at that and so

did Laurie. A real laugh, not that nervous chuckle. In the darkness beneath the pier, his bone-white face was flushed a pale and dusty pink. Every once and a while, he giggled a little too hard and leaned into her arm. Rolling her cigarette from one side of her mouth to the other, Shaw patted him on the back and began laying her lines.

"Speaking of noble, you remember Kate?"

Laurie rubbed at one of his eyes and breathed a heavy, snotty breath in through his nose. "Your sister? Twenty years older than you, last I remember."

"She was. Had herself a son about a decade ago. Croaked soon after."

"Sorry to hear it."

"So was I. Owed Kate a few things. Namely money, but a few favors too. The boy hadn't a father, so I figured he'd make a nice way to break even. Twelve years later, I'm calling that noble. Kid's cost me a fortune."

"Still alive then?"

"For now. I've been trying to get us off Osteran, but half of my contacts are bloody dead." Shaw

scratched at her chin. Her elbow bumped his. "Figured you might be able to do something, being Kestajn and all."

Laurie drew away from her and began to rub his arms again. The air had gotten colder, and Shaw could hear jackboots thundering back and forth on the pier above. "Sounds bad, Shaw."

"Righto."

"But uh. Like you said, it's a private operation. The commissioner's got a hand in it. Lots of men too." His voice trembled. "I wish I could help you, Shaw. But the *Adjudicator* isn't a place for stowaways. I'd hate to see you get hurt. Your nephew especially."

Shaw nodded and rose from her seat. Laurie copied her, stumbling a little on the uneven rocks. Her cigarette was nearly out, a little blinking ember in the darkness. Overhead, the shouts grew louder and Laurie's head finally snapped up.

"I appreciate the concern, Laurie."

"Yeah, Shaw. Of course. You're awful good here. In Osteran, I mean." He clasped her arm with a gloved hand, but his eyes were on the boards above.

"You'll do good by your nephew. You will! Sure you've been struggling, but you're smart, Shaw. You'll get out."

"Means a lot, Laurie." Shaw rested her hand on his, and gave him a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

He looked down and gave her another sheepish grin. His grip on her arm was weak. "Glad to hear it. And good seeing you! You should probably wait here, Shaw. I'll go meet the squad."

Shaw, who was not the hugging type, opened her arms wide. "Tell them you went for a leak. Took the scenic route."

He came in to pat her on the back, laughing that nervous laugh again. "Sure thing, Shaw," he said. He didn't feel her hands wandering, pressing lightly here and there.

Along his belt, she found a metal fastener, and then the shape of a small, square bottle. She knew it was there—a flask of the Cure. No Kestajn soldier would wander into Ostaran without one. Despite what she told Laurie, there were still a few buyers left in town. Men and women like her who just couldn't

get sick. People who used their immunity to profiteer off the plague. Shaw was one of them, but she was tired. She'd sell the Cure and be done with it. Two tickets off of Osteran, one way or another.

As Laurie turned away from her, Shaw palmed a knife. Her old friend proved less reasonable than she hoped. Shaw gambled and lost, but that was fine. So had Laurie.



Sunday Mornings

Kathryn Richmond

A cool breeze found its way under my jacket as I made my way through the generous yard. I stopped in the back, examining the old maple tree just ten feet from the property line. When I had bought this house with my new wife, our contractor had offered to have it cut down. It had been hit by lightning years ago, leaving the upper left side black and crumbling. But the rest of the tree still lived, its green leaves a bright contrast to the dark scar, and my wife decided it just needed some love. So when we moved into the house we got a chisel, and carved our names and the date into the bark. She had smiled, saying there was no stronger symbol of love to give the tree.

It had been our tree. We used to set up a picnic every Sunday morning and eat brunch under its branches with the sun filtering through the leaves to land on our blanket. When it was

warm out we would stay there well into the afternoon reading. I would lean my back against our tree and she would lay her head on my thigh, only to sit up and work her way under my arm when her arms ached from holding a book over her head. I told her that her poetry was nothing but pretty words. She said my fantasy books simply rehashed the same cowboys vs Indians story over and over. I was never happier.

But today there was no morning picnic under our tree; no teasing banter; no quiet discussion of rhymes and plot lines. Today there was just me, a "for sale" sign hanging by the house, and the axe I had borrowed from the neighbor's shed. It was heavy in my hands as I raised the sharpened tool above my shoulder. I blinked the water out of my eyes, and swung. The wood split, the crack echoing throughout the yard. Leaves fell from the shaking branches in a kaleidoscope of orange and brown. They crunched beneath my feet as I shifted, pulling the axe from the dead and brittle wood. I placed my hand against the wound that split our names in two, and wondered where we went wrong.



Poetry



Host and Decompose

Tempeste Mavys

With a pair of pliers, you pull me by my ribcage.

Snap it in half and rip through my chest,

Grab me by my spine and drag yourself in.

Tear my jaw in two and use it as you please.

Force my shoulders to shudder.

Beat my heart with your palm.

Inflate my lungs like balloons.

I'll try not to gag as you reach up my esophagus.

I'll try to breath as you fill my windpipe.

You'll try to make room amongst my guts,

Keep me alive as long as you need,

Feed off my meat until I'm sickly and weak.

And once I'm all ate up

And you're tired of living in me,

Leave my hallowed carcass to decompose

And find your next host.



Degas' Captives

Kate Beauchamp

Degas invents imaginary characters,
Their petite figures painted in light colors.
A masterful hand carefully positions their stiff skirts
and outstretched arms,
Brought to life, only to be imprisoned.

They should be twirling across the stage.
A smile masking their intense concentration,
As they prepare for their next show

There should be gossip;
A clouded fountain spewing tales of imperfections and
wrongdoings,
Enemies and friends alike thrown in.

Where is the music?
Gently accompanied by the creaking of the floorboards
As performers rehearse leap sequences again and again
Striving for unreachable perfection

Why is the instructor not reprimanding
Requiring straight legs and pointed toes
He has taken his stance,
A critique on his lips,
But he remains silent.

The painting has all the potential for life,
Yet is lifeless.

Dancers trapped.
Stuck behind glass somewhere high on the wall
Caught in motion,
Yet unable to spin, leap, or fly.

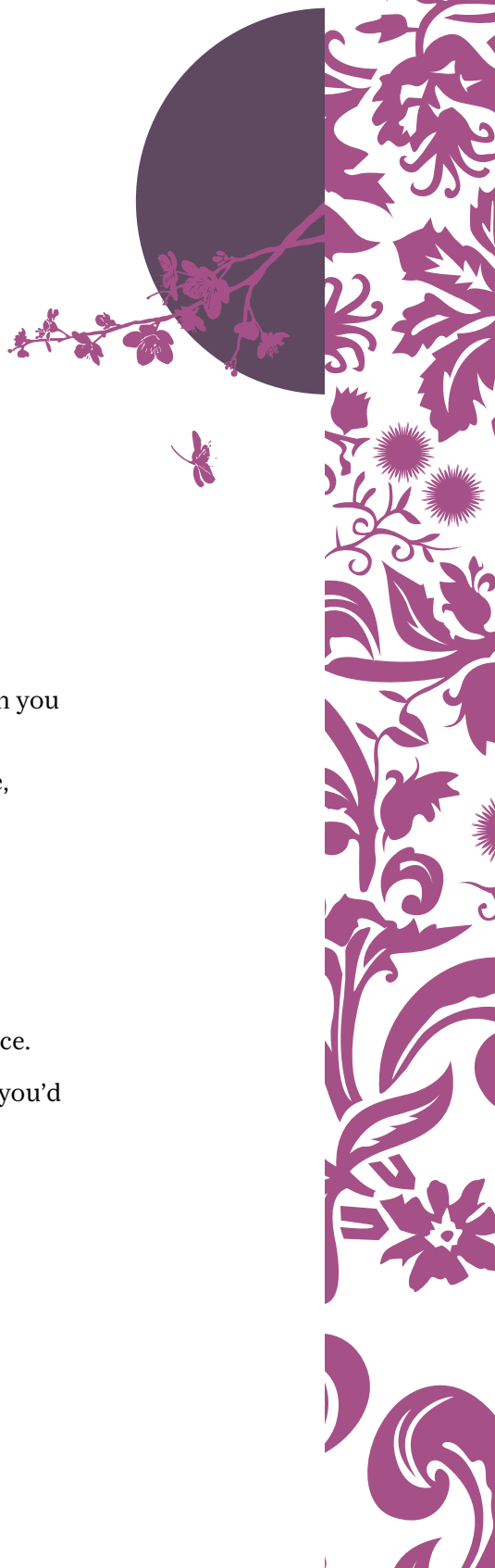
They are in constant preparation for what is to come,
But it will never arrive.
Shackled to the page with thick strokes of paint,
Imprisoned by the light touch of Degas' brush.



Like a Moth

Tempeste Mavys

I scooped you up like a moth out of water
Hoping you start flailing again,
But you just laid there in my hand.
As water rushed through my fingers it must have taken you
along with it.
You used to glow soft white, and maybe still to me,
A stream of purity fluttering through the air,
Content and joyful by merely staying afloat,
Caught by gravity you sunk below the currents,
And I tried to resuscitate your flight
With a waterfall of my own plummeting from my face.
I would have taken an ocean into my lungs if it meant you'd
stay safe.



Fear

Oniquia White

Shivering through experiences past
Allowing temptation to break through.
New routines outshining the old but still difficult to
stay on track.
Echoes of your past self thundering down through the
deafening silence.
Slicing through the fog from the early morning Spring.
Inner voices trying to convince you to go back.
The bitter taste of ginger igniting on the way down.
The imitating voices of the extinct life are hindering the
perseverance of the future.
Speeding momentum, accelerating time.
Allow yourself to burst free of the hold it once had on
your
Mind.
Body.
Soul.
Fight the anaconda, constricting your well being.
Attack the elephant, sitting on your chest.
Push through the drought with a parched tongue
through time.

A Letter to Myself

Michaela Evans

Wintry days are the making of one another,
An echo taken up, carried in spare hours.
Simple arithmetic for quiet fingers.
Count them—one and two.
Again and again,
As many times as you like.
See what is.
See what's not.

These hands that draft in tens.
Folded in the lap, fingers twined.
The safest embrace I know.
Count them up, if you can.

Never have I cuffed my sleeve
And found an open heart.
These clean and careful hands,
A plate of fine china
Captive to the gilded cupboard.
Perhaps a painting,
Hung tarnished and waiting
In a room too grand for guests.

Seldom there comes an instant

Between the cold and counting;
A venture to surrender
The sum of myself.
Become a solitary moment:
Spring, or else summer.
Crashing through the wildflowers
Petals broken beneath the sun.
And all the wild way,
A glare in the periphery.
The frantic brushstroke of a rabbit,
Prince of open hearts.

Frosting on your inheritance,
It says.
Fingerprints in the composition.
What numbers add to answers
That satisfy?

But even the slightest sigh
Turns to drafts that stir the soul,
Sucking the marrow from summer embers
And little rabbit bones.

I fold my hands.
They settle in tens.
There is safety in numbers
And winters must be weathered alone.

Home

Taylor Tope

The field was like home,
 We never wanted to leave.
 Always accepting
 Of who we are,
 And who we'll become.
 We took comfort in the fence,
 Surrounding the outfield.
 As if it would protect us
 As walls of a house would.
 Base number four,
 Was the ultimate destination,
 And where we always
 Eventually ended up.
 That's why our hearts,
 Will always carry us home.



Locker Room Talk

Holly Koglin

Don't tell me it's just locker room talk.
 The kind of stuff that is brushed under the rug.
 They're just "mean things" being said?
 That's not fair.

One day your mother pulls you aside,
 Probably your first time going out,
 To give you the rules that are essential for survival.

I'm pissed I have to hold my keys like a knife,
 White knuckles showing my tight grip.
 Do you know how annoying it is to look over my
 shoulder every four steps?
 All just to make sure I'm not being followed to my car.
 Pepper spray and a whistle become an accessory on
 my keychain.
 It's heavy to carry around my neck, but I'd rather have
 a sore neck,
 Than my body in a ditch, decaying.
 No, I don't have a boyfriend.
 Yes, that answer will change when the next older man
 asks
 "What do you mean I can't have your phone number?"

Until you're raised in a world where you have to antici-
 pate your next attacker,
 Don't find excuses for the wrongful behavior.
 This isn't a "just in case" situation.
 Because my odds of getting raped are 1 in 4.
 What's even worse are my odds
 My next president dismisses sexual assault as locker
 room talk.

Hair

Hannah Stephens

I'm cutting my hair.
 My mom thinks it's cute,
 But I don't really care.
 You touched it so it now means nothing but split ends
 and bleach in my skull.
 I'm cutting my hair;
 You're not welcome here.
 I hope you hate how it looks and I hope my dad hates
 it, too;
 New season new me is the cliché I chose.

 I'm cutting my hair:
 I like it more than I ever liked you.
 You are dead ends and fine words.
 I hope my dust fills your lungs and you long for me;
 But I don't care,
 I'm cutting my hair.

I'm cutting my hair because it's gross,
 More gross than you and your venom kiss.
 I'm cutting my hair because it's cute;
 I'm cutting my hair because I despise you.

 I'm at the sink holding scissors and razors;
 I wish they were as sharp as your eye for imperfection.
 I look in the mirror,
 But I don't see myself;
 I see someone stronger and wiser and better than you.

 Can you recognize such a pretty little thing?
 Makeup smeared across my lips,
 Chunks of blonde missing?
 Would you even care if these scissors slip,
 Scaring my face and obstructing your view?

 Did I ever mean anything to you?
 But why do I care?..
 I already cut my hair.

School Nights

Jonathan Ferriell

It's Thursday night.
 Art history lets out.
 Your text dings in my phone.
 You won't be here till 9:30.
 I'll meet Peter in the meanwhile by the auditorium,
 till the sky above the bell tower turns a deep, dark,
 blue.
 Peter will leave.
 You'll show up.
 We'll take the commercial strip marked by head and
 tail-lights to the café,
 get a booth or a seat at the bar,
 a non caffeinated cup of tea on the house.
 We'll yell at each-other,
 trying to catch up over live tributes to obscure folk
 musicians long past
 like the half familiar faces that appear to shake hands
 and pat you on the back,
 then disappear to who knows where.
 A text from B will ding in my phone.
 He's home.

We'll disappear,
 back onto the strip,
 towards the supermarkets,
 department stores,
 chain restaurants
 and laundromats,
 the quiet part of the city on the bay of the great lake,
 where parks and cemeteries,
 private beaches and beach homes
 are planted on its coast,
 where B's little green house is nestled
 away from damp and frigid harbors
 in fleeting squares of suburban bliss.
 The only pale yellow light on the block
 will emit from his window.
 His dads asleep.
 By 2:30,
 through a haze of burning cigarettes,
 we'll fall asleep
 to the latest acclaimed dramas on TV.

Side by Side

Cassidy Livingston

I held the delicate photograph in my hand,
 Reminiscing about our younger years.
 Not only were we cousins, but best friends.
 Having so much fun, never looking at the camera lens.
 We stood hand- in- hand.
 Yet something caught my attention.
 As I pointed towards the beautiful petals filled with
 color.
 Something so simple, yet fascinating to our innocent
 minds.
 The world was still so new, with so much to explore,
 We could barely imagine what was in store,
 Things we had never seen before.
 We wonder what other stories may remain untold.
 What other secrets this world may hold.
 We wanted to run; and explore.
 Chasing our imagination through uncharted territory.
 While our dreams may take us far and wide,
 Our hands remained gripped, side by side.

Red

Carly Verbeke

It was the color of her evening gown
 as you dipped her on the dance floor
 The color of the rose she wore
 behind her ear
 It was the color of her lipstick found
 on your collarbone
 The color of the marks the cloth would leave every
 time you washed away your guilt.
 It was the color of the rage you saw
 behind your wife's eyes
 The color of the imprint left on your face;
 It was the color of the embarrassment you felt rising to
 your cheeks
 as you picked up the pieces of the (now broken) vase.
 But now it's only the color of the stain you see left in
 the bathroom sink.

Roses

Wade Holcomb

Remember when we painted flowers on the walls
Of your bedroom in the heat of July?
I stared at them for hours until we fell asleep
An eternal symbol of a love never fading

Roses were never as pretty as your face
When you looked after we released our brushes
I swear to God I'll never forget
That smile as we collapsed on your bed

I'd think about those flowers from time to time
From the walk to class to drives back home
Even in December I could still feel the heat
Radiating from the memory of July

Still at your funeral, I feel warm
From the roses that are clutched in my hands
I just pray they keep you less cold
As the petals follow you down

Ducks

Tempeste Mavys

So the daughter
Of the family disaster
Inherited his temper.
Booming and violent,
His anger.
But hers refined
To bite marks on wrists
And damning herself.
There are other children.
They follow drunken footsteps
Like ducks in a row,
A waddling war path.
The family laughs.
The holidays are full.
The daughter stands back,
Damned but aware:
All ducks get cooked.

If I Weren't Polish, I'd Be Fine

Therese Majeski

I don't know how to polka, so I pretend,
catching pieces of what the grownup dancers do,
imitating a bouncing, swaying step, homely cousin to the
waltz,
a wary immigrant to my feet.
And the Queen of Polka,
more country than Polish wearing vest and jeans,
leads the band with accordion and whoops
in cheerful songs sounding all alike.

My father leads me
in steps that send us into spins and my hair into tangles.
Our matching, rounded cheeks forced back by smiles,
we bluff, pretending we know how to polka.

Inheritance of a Lifetime

Elizabeth (Lisa) Green

Grandpa Jim left no inheritance
No furrows of land save for furrowed brows
No purse of riches save for his pursed lips
Echoing upon my reflected face

He left us a single broken window
Shattered by stones of jilted friends
Prattling that Jim deflowered a waitress
While his five children learned the alphabet

Jim died alone in the family sedan
In a dingy K-Mart parking lot
Contentious words with his wife who once
Said not to leave marks when hitting the kids

Wood paneled walls in a South Bend trailer
Speak whispers of tyranny and violence
Bare linoleum kitchen floors
Illustrate a woman thrilled to forget

Jim's petulance grievously persists
In the synapses of his descendants
When my father beat me, his hands were Jim's
When I strike my lover, Jim's hands are mine.

Memories of a Life

Maria Vallee

A light burst through dark clouds, and birds sang a tune,

with Lauren's first breath.

An innocent girl, not safe from the Depression,
nor the Second World War that soon followed.

With bright eyes and a wide smile,
she hid anxieties and worries,
while she helped hopeless soldiers defeat theirs.

Frederick's charm changed Lauren's mindset for a time.
At their wedding, they waltzed; she smiled.
His sweet words of love created half a dozen children.
Lauren then met the man she had married.
The liar and cheater spit out hurtful words,
but he'd charm all the neighbors in a
different world.

Children gone too soon, Lauren and Frederick lived
side-by-side,

in a house too big, still too close.

The grandfather clock slowly clicked by;

Lauren could barely hear it now, seated near the bay
window.

Children laughed outside, headed to the lake,
where she would go herself, once upon a time.

The end of Summer made the laughter cease;
bright flowers along the path lost their spirit,
as she lost hers.

The "thud" of his fall in the night still haunts her
dreams.

A stroke, meant to ruin lives, saved theirs.

Frederick, unable to live at home, had time to think;

The man's eyes showed remorse—he whispered "I'm
sorry."

Lauren's heart, hardened from years of silent punish-
ments and harsh words,
softened.

She forgave; he let go.

With a breath of relief,
the light put out was alive again.

Snow-Tinted Spectacles

Therese Majeski

A soft second skin grown against cold reality,
 snows like this have nestled stories.
 Frail match girls and orphans huddled by garret fires,
 a miser cowering from a doorknocker.
 Too vivid to be real,
 the snowfall bespeaks story,
 hints at magic
 from a realm of pulp and ink.



The Corrupted Church

Maria Vallee

Has a crime been committed in His home?
 The church—a place of refuge and safety,
 Hopefully, souls stained with sin become pure again;
 Yet, the air is heavy with hypocrisy,
 And the pews are full of judgmental souls;
 Church doors are forced shut, but pockets are full;
 Robots surround me with self-serving goals.
 A listless homily of the gospel
 Does nothing to honor the one who died for us;
 But I'm still a puppet supporting thieves,
 Hoping for change without any exertion;
 The hostile church has turned many away,
 But we continue to give thanks.

The Snow is Real

Therese Majeski

Twilight sees snow on the town,
a soft second skin grown against
cold reality.

The snow breaths moist vitality,
offering a transcendence of the ordinary
drawn nearer by threads of frost.

Updrafts of stinging crystals,
tastes of winter's whiskey,
benumb and yet enliven.

Cool powder clings to brick protectively.
Mounds of white balance on lampposts and branches,
plump wire-walkers that may fall.

Too vivid to be real,
the snowfall bespeaks fiction,
hints at magic.

Its power could raise the world of fiction
from a bed of pulp and ink,
blurring the line between ours and theirs.

Such snows have nestled stories.
Frail match girls and orphans huddled by garret fires
are conjured by each falling flake.

Such dustings change the world,
replace it with a vital copy
more real than that before.

Creaky Little House

Danielle Saums

Today I walked through your house for the last time.
I sat on the cold, bare floors and remembered.
Little toes that explored the kitchen late at night;
On a treasure hunt for snacks that you always left out.
And when the loud Spanish music from Papa's old
stereo woke us,

We'd have butter pecan ice cream for breakfast.
Turning the knob of your bedroom door, I remembered.
The clinking of the old belt that used to hang,
But was never worn.

As I glanced up toward the dusty shelf in the closet, I
remembered.

The tin can full of candy that used to tease us,
Too high for us to ever reach,
Too low for us not to try.

I sat on the old bench out front,
Where you used to lounge.

As I listened to the train roar by, I remembered.

Dozens of flowers that we'd pick by the tracks.

You'd set those yellow weeds on the countertop and
pretend they were beautiful.

As I sit here remembering, I now know;

Those flowers held the same beauty as the creaky little
house I grew up in.

Three Pair

Kerrie Sparling

What could one make out to be
The intersecting of three, scattered lives
What can one conclude about a set of three
But that one thing they share are the same eyes?

The first possesses a strong iron will
Inside she carries thoughts lurking from the past
Sometimes wary when considering the next hill
Upon her two souls rest as she constructs something
to last

Cast is the second half way across the globe
Hoping to serve others as was laid in her heart
Sometimes faltering clad in her foreign robe
A deep resolute bids her to fulfill her part

Quietly looking in from the side is the third
Well aware of life's pressures mounting
Sometimes enclosed, a caged bird
With silent strength she stands, countless and still
counting

Live gives each one a unique air
Some with souls spunky and keen
What would you think if you came across three pair
Of individuals with orbs of olive green?



Treadmill

Gwen Allen

I'm gasping for air,
Running for hours,
And going nowhere.

My muscles are strained,
And by the looks of my forehead,
It appears to have rained.

Back and forth I am pacing,
While sitting perfectly still, because
My mind is the one that is racing.



Visual Arts





Lidded Jar

Chavenia Hernandez





No Time

Gregory Turner



Determination

Tyler Berdan



Evening Hunt

Emily Swierkosz



Draining

Carrie Scheffler



Queen Of Hearts

Carrie Scheffler



Self Portrait

JR McPhail



Little Babe

Gregory Turner



Chilli Mac

Gregory Turner



Contact Left, Contact Right

Gregory Turner



Jagged Life & Love

Chavenia Hernandez



Eternally Constant

Chavenia Hernandez



The Cottage

Brenda Kasten



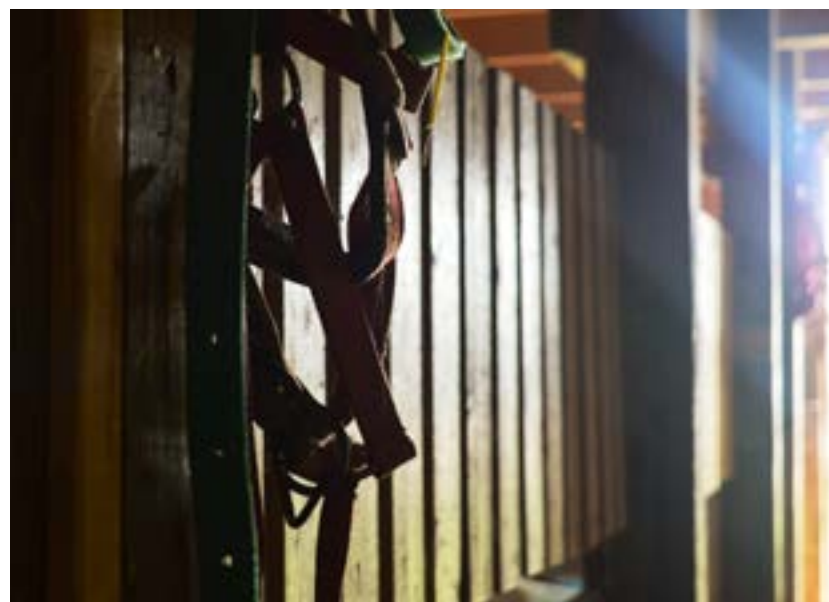
Unity

Brenda Kasten



Lines in a Barn

Joanna Ingles



Shell-fie

Brittany Burt



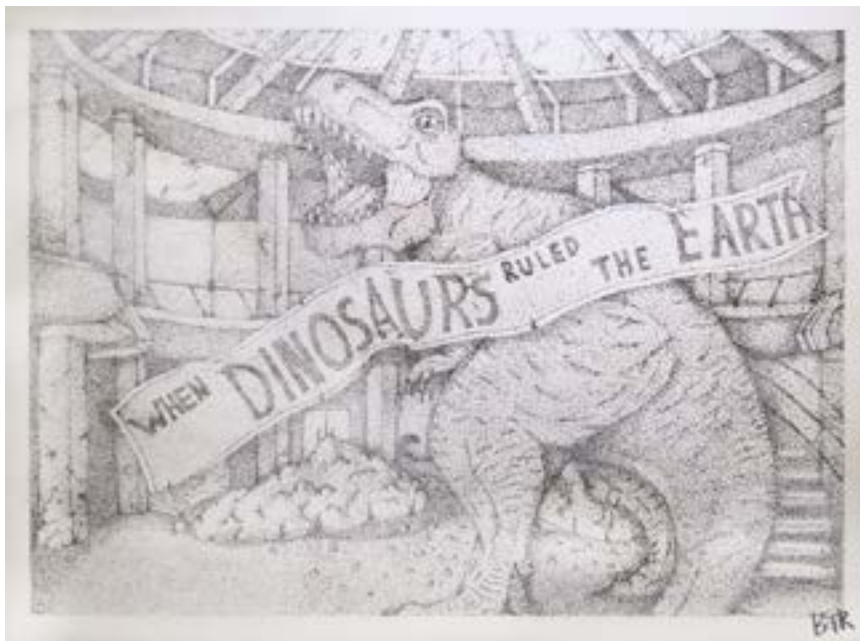
Tranquility

Shawn Myshock



Park is Closed

Brandon Reed



VISUAL ARTS | SELECTION OF MERIT

A.I.

Jessica Gray



VISUAL ARTS | SELECTION OF MERIT

Regal

Jessica Gray



Now You See Me

Rachel Henion



